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MAGIC MIKE, THE MAN OF FRILLS;

Or, BAD BEN'S BAD BRIGADE.

BY WM. R. EYSTER,

AUTHOR OF "PISTOL PARDS," "SOFT HAND SHARP," "HANDS UP," "DANDY DARKE," "FARO FRANK," ETC., ETC.



TO ALL APPEARANCES HE WAS SWINGING IN THE AIR OVER A CHASM, WHOSE BLACK DEPTHS LAY ON EITHER SIDE.

Magic Mike,

THE MAN OF FRILLS;

OR,
Bad Ben's Bad Brigade.

A Story of the Labyrinths at Walnut Bar.

BY WM. R. EYSTER,
AUTHOR OF "PISTOL PARDS," "CAPTAIN CUT-SLEEVE," "HANDS UP," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A GRIST OF ACTORS.

THE two looked enough alike in face to be brothers.

"If you dare!"

"I dare!"

"Draw!"

"Draw it is!"

"Chip!"

There was a sharp report, followed so closely by another that the two sounds almost blended.

Then there was a sound between a cry and a groan, as one of the two men fell with a crash.

"As usual," remarked the other, coolly, as though it was an every-day affair.

"Right through the heart. Satan's own luck I have had, for he took the chance I gave him and fired first. Who would have thought to find him so soon. He knew me on sight, and wasted no time in foolishness. There is no hate like that which comes of broken friendship, and hate hurries a man up when there's a chance for revenge. Now to find the rest."

Without a single look at the face of the victim the man turned and stepped away.

One backward glance he gave, but it was at a splendid brown mustang that stood like a statue a rod or so from the fallen man.

"To the victor belong the spoils, and yonder, from its looks, is the best piece of horseflesh I have met for many a day. It's a temptation for a man on foot-back, but hanged if I'll have anything but his blood, and I don't know that I wanted that on my hands quite so soon."

It was a temptation, as his lingering footsteps for a moment or two gave evidence.

Then he quickened his steps and went on into the shadows. There could be no ordinary hate in the heart of this man to leave the body of his enemy even to the wolves and buzzards.

The place was wild, desolate, lonely. One to a thousand were the chances that there was not a living soul within a mile of the spot where these two men unexpectedly met, fought, and one of them fell.

Yet a spectator there was; a young girl, who, rifle in hand, crouched, and waited.

Hardly had the sound of the departing footsteps died away in the distance when she darted from her place of concealment.

"One is down," she muttered.

"Which one? Oh, if he has robbed me of my revenge I will follow him to the end of the earth but I will slay him! There is one life sacred to my hand; but the time has not come for the taking of it. No! Not yet!"

Her step was as light as that of a fawn—her eye as quick as that of a red Indian.

The man on the ground made a movement.

On the instant she halted and dropped upon one knee, her rifle brought to a ready.

Then she heard a low whistle, and the mustang gave a whinny and a quick bound.

At that the girl half-raised her rifle; and then, as suddenly dropped it.

"No, no," she muttered. "I must know beyond mistake; yet I dare not face him; dare not look once in his burning eyes. Once again within the range of their basilisk power and I am lost forever! Yet, if he dies there?"

She needed not to have felt such a fear. Even while she looked she saw the man that she had believed dead, leap upon his mustang, without touching rein or stirrup!

A shrill, reedy yell, as though he was weak from wound or excitement; and then the gallant mustang dashed away, the man bending down over his neck.

"Hal!" said the girl, rising from her half-kneeling posture.

"He takes the road to Walnut Bar. If he goes through perhaps we may meet to-night. One thing, at least, I now know, beyond a doubt: Michael Marshall lives! For the rest—time shall show."

Her excitement had died, and now she looked around her with the air of one trying to fix in her mind all the surroundings of the place.

"The very spot," she muttered. "One day soon we will meet. I will draw him here. Then, let him guard himself! I will make no such mistakes as this. Now, we must journey on if we would be in time for the Bar to-night."

She placed a little ivory whistle between her lips, and blew a long trilling note.

Almost instantly there came an answer—a sound exactly similar

From the shade of the mesquites, the figure of a man—or what had such a semblance—slowly shambled forth.

"Ah, Lame Luke, our journey draws near its end. It was he—and he still lives! Bring on the pets; it is time for us to be traveling, though only a few miles more will bring us to the Bar."

"I ain't so sure ye'll be ther better fur findin' him. When yer do it fur good, thar'll be an eend ter a good part ov yer life; but you're ther jedge, an' Lame Luke s'ands by yer to ther last—him an' ther boys. They're gettin' mighty onpatient, too."

"Yes, we must move on; but it will not be for long, now. Call them up."

The girl spoke impatiently, as though she did not altogether relish what Lame Luke had said; and she looked over into the canyon, where the shadows were already beginning to darken.

"Don't you feel riled when Luke Liver gives yer a piece ov his mind, Miss Alta. It's a dark trail you've been runnin' on, an' mebbe yer don't know how you'll feel when yer gits to ther eend."

The man evidently intended his words to have a pacific effect, though he looked but little like one who would be troubled with any extraordinary softness of heart.

He had a short, squat figure, a dark face, well covered with a long, full beard. His shoulders, broad and powerful, were not matches, one being several inches higher than the other, and apparently larger all over. One leg was longer than the other, and the disproportion was what caused his singular gait.

As he ceased speaking, he put up one immense bony hand to his mouth, using it somewhat after the manner of a speaking-trumpet, though his voice was not raised to any very high pitch.

"Who-ee!" he called; "who ee!"

Then he ceased and listened.

"Ah, Old Eph is coming, and the others will follow him right along. We can leave at once."

The girl had her eyes fixed upon the point in the mesquites at which they had debouched.

As she looked there could plainly be heard the noise of shuffling footsteps, and then three bears, two of them three-quarters grown, made their appearance.

The beasts were evidently tame. They came forward without hesitation, and the foremost, which was much the largest, only halted when he stood just at the side of the girl.

"So, Old Eph," she said, lightly patting the brute on the head, "You think it is a long time between meals? Well, so do I. But Walnut Bar is not far away, and Luke will lead us to it by the shortest cut. There your wants will no doubt be supplied. Come, sir! This way, we must be moving."

Lame Luke took the hint and moved off with the two smaller animals at his heels, while the girl, with Old Eph at her side, brought up the rear.

Five, ten minutes passed. The evening shadows were growing longer, and the place seemed more than ever deserted when a foot-step again broke the silence, and then an intruder came gliding into the dingle.

Perhaps his heart had softened somewhat—just as likely he had returned for the brown mustang. It was no stranger to the spot, but the victor in the late duel.

He was a young man, apparently, dressed in a suit of black ribbed-velvet—the pantaloons wide and flowing, the upper garment more like a tunic than a coat. His face was shaded by a broad-brimmed sombrero of the same color as his suit, and his belt was garnished with ready weapons.

Without hesitation he approached the spot where he had left his antagonist lying.

Then he gave a sudden start.

The body was no longer there.

He bent down nearer to the ground and examined the spot by the uncertain light, while his hand went automatically to his belt.

Then he laughed lightly, and the sound was soft and musical.

"Good enough! There's nothing like having a soft streak around one's heart. If I hadn't come back to bury the man that blasted my love and my life, I would never have known that he had returned to life again until I met him with the devil in his eye, and the drop in his hands. He has had life enough left to spring into his saddle, and I suppose he has gone on to Walnut Bar. When he gets there I won't be far behind."

"An' then thar'll be music in ther air—eh, pardy! I'm goin' thar myself, an' whar I go, thar's jist too much fun fur ary use. Kitch on ef yer wants ter bear ther horns a-blowin' an' the music soundin'."

The man in velvet turned like a flash.

"And who may you be, my honest friend? And what call have I got to mix in your affairs, or you in mine?"

"Me? I'm Tombstone Tom, chief ov perfice in that lovely burg. I'm hyer ter onmask villainy, ketch crime, an' bring several bad men right down to ther mutton. Ez you seem ter be a stranger, lookin' fer su'thing ter do, I gi'n yer a chance right hyer an' now, ter wring in with ther law, which are ther strong side fu'st

an' last, an' make yerself solid with ther territory ov Arizony."

The young man eyed his *vis-a-vis* with some deliberation before he spoke.

Tombstone Tom was not such a man, judging by his looks, as he would naturally select for a companion. His heavy beard covered the most of his countenance, though enough could be seen to show that he was red-faced, bloated, and bear-eyed. His shoulders were broad, and his form generally was either brawny or bloated. His shockingly bad hat, boots and clothes pronounced his fortunes at a low ebb; and from the twinkle that crept into his bloodshot eyes, and the unreliable tone of his voice, it did not look as though one would go far out of the road in pronouncing him the champion liar, though, and dead-beat of the territory.

The inspection was nevertheless not altogether satisfactory, for the young man did not treat the last comer with that scorn that one might have expected, taking into consideration the difference in the appearance of the two. He spoke softly—almost respectfully:

"I wasn't aware that Tombstone had any police—at least to s'are. If they have such an institution I should think that between cowboys on the tear, rustlers on the boom, and promiscuous devils on their ears, there would be plenty of employment at home. Or maybe the air is so unhealthy there that you feel called upon to seek to recuperate in some more salubrious clime? If that be the case it would have been wisdom to find out beforehand something about the country toward which you have tur'ed your steps. You evidently have made no effort, and it is but right that I should tell you that Walnut Bar is considered to be by all odds the most unwholesome meridian this side of Chicago."

"Oh, say, what's this ye'r' givin' me? Yer think I'm erfaid, an' you'll rattle off chin-music till yer gits my p'nts. I give it to yer straight; an' ef yer don't b'lieve me, so much the wuss fur you. I'm ther real, onadulterated, bigh cockalorum ov detectives—an' ez yer vally yer life hed yer better ketch on whar I gi'n yer ther chance ter git hold."

"And if I do not heed your warning?"

The man in velvet spoke in a jesting tone, as though he who had approached him was scarcely worth the humoring; but, in default of anything better might serve for amusement for the time being.

"Then, I reckon, in the scrimmage ov ther round-up you'll stand a mighty good chance ter git took in outen ther wet. I'm yer only hold, an' don't yer furgit it."

"See here, what is your game? I've seen you somewhere, havn't I? You look like a man they bung for horse-stealing in the flush times at Red Earth; but he was dead before they got through with him."

"'Sul!" said Tombstone Tom, in a low, warning tone. "Thar's whar yer war mistook. I'm ther chap—Tom Burke—which it war all er mistake. I reckoned I knewed yer. You was ther man ez lost ther hoss—eh? An' they called yer Magic Mike, ther Man ov Frills—eh? Oh, I ain't much ter look at, but I'm a be-ole cyclone ter remember. You knotted ther rope; an' Lame Luke, he kicked ther musl. I drepped to yer ther blessed minute I clapped eyes on yer; an' I sez, sez I, hyer's ther man yer wants fer a side pard when yer chips in at ther howlin' wilderness ov sin which blossoms at Walnut Bar, an' Poker Flat. But, say, now, what's yer handle in these stampin'-grounds? I don't reckon yer kin'ers 'bout bevin' it ginner'lly knowed—"

"Hold on there! I don't change my name with the camp. Magic Mike was good enough at Tierra Rojo—it will be good enough at Walnut Bar. Michael Marshall is a good, honest, square handle for a man of the same sort."

Tombstone Tom uttered a snort that might have been a half-suppressed sneeze or an expression of derision.

"Excuse me, pard; you make me smile."

"You'll grin in a way that is ghastly, soon, if you don't show your hand up. I set you down for a dead-beat at first; I begin to think you are something worse."

The tones of the young man whom the tramp, bad called Magic Mike were now sharp and earnest. It seemed as though he had begun to change his opinion of the dilapidated, frowsy scoundrel.

"Ea-sy, my lord! I gi'n.it to yer straight off ther handle, ez I said afore. We're gittin' nigher Walnut Bar; an' ez I know yer won't be thar a day afore yer in a peck o' trouble I thort I'd let yer know thar would be one man thar ez you could rely on. Bein' a detective, bent on ther s'presshun ov vice, an' ther extermination ov them ez makes victims, I c'u'dn't help chukkin' in a word ov warnin', ez I see'd yer a-peramberlatin' forra'ds like er lam' to ther slaughter. I notissed that yer hev bed yer hand foolin' 'round yer sixes, sence I bin talkin' to yer, but that wer' nonsense. Lemme gi'n yer this last advice. Keep yer eyes peeled; an' trust in Tombstone Tom. I don't bear no ill-will 'bout that boss case, an' I'm hyer ter back Lame Luke's game ef I see it. Now, drive or I ain't nothin' more ter say."

The last sentence was spoken in a louder

clearer tone of voice than had yet been used; and as if in very answer to a preconcerted signal, half a dozen forms arose in the darkness, there was the clicking sound of half a dozen hammers brought to full cock, while the leader of the apparitions exclaimed:

"But I have! Hands up, both! Move a step further and you are dead men!"

CHAPTER II.

HELD UP.

WALNUT BAR had been the center of two rushes, something like a year apart as regards time.

The first was shortly after the crush at Glory Gulch.

Two or three men followed the natural roadway down, and discovered what seemed to be very good indications of pay gravel, and were driven off by the attack of a dozen or more Indians.

They went back to Glory Gulch, which was beginning to be overcrowded, and having told their news, left there within twenty-four hours at the head of a young army.

The Apaches had evacuated by the time they reached the spot, and work began in the new diggings at once, with large, though brief, success.

The bar petered out, and as they were not ready to attack the quartz in the neighboring hills, the most of the miners went away, some following the river on down to Cactus Fork, while others made their way across the mountains to Poker Flat, and the rest sought pastures entirely new.

No one supposed that the camp would ever recover its vanished prestige, and owners of corner lots would have sold cheap.

It was a water-spout, a cloud-burst, or something of the kind that did the business.

An irresistible volume of water came pouring down through the canyon north of the little town, swirling around the mound on which, in prudent anticipation of some such catastrophe, the first-comers had built.

The rush of the wave was terrible.

It tore off tons and tons of rocks and dirt, and washed away several prominent citizens, never again heard from; but it unearthed a strip of an old river-bed, whose existence had hitherto been unsuspected.

The way the news spread beat the telegraph. The rush began again; Glory Gulch poured down its surplus population, Poker Flat added to the stream, and soon the Bar had, in the language of its prominent citizens, an immense population.

Best of all, that population had come to stay. Not only was much dust taken out of the washings, but the fame of its quartz was spread afar, and capital and brains were willing to take hold, preliminary pilgrimages having satisfied the experts that there were millions as good as in sight.

Where the prey is the vultures gather together.

In addition to the toilers there was a sporting population, unprecedented in number and quality; so that the town was as lively as any two of its size further back, and a chief in that camp was a wonderful man indeed, if he lasted longer than a week or two, while the keeper of a saloon, or the proprietor of a "hash-house," did not exactly occupy a bed of roses.

Johnny Goodman had come down from Glory Gulch, where he had had the misfortune to be burned out, and started a hotel; a real first-class, out-and-out affair. He was ready to accommodate every one that had the stamps for his bill, and though there were plenty of other lodging-houses, he had all of the first-class transitory custom, and a large share of the rest.

It was a few hours previous to the occurrences mentioned in the foregoing chapter that a special coach was rattling along the trail from the Gulch to Walnut Bar.

There were four inside passengers and two outsides, while the boot of the vehicle was well filled with baggage.

On the front seat inside, their backs to the horses, sat two men, with an appearance wholly different from that of the ordinary passengers upon the line.

Both wore "store clothes"—in other words, suits that were made for fashion as much as for wear.

The elder of these two men was well over fifty, if one could judge from his grizzled hair and beard, the crow's-feet around the corners of his eyes, and his dull complexion.

There was, however, enough fire in his eye and vigor in his movements to show that he was by no means superannuated; and the keen glances that he cast around him from time to time, and the shrewd questions that he asked about the country and its inhabitants, were convincing evidences that he was very much awake.

His companion was a much younger man, clad in clothes that were of serviceable goods but fashionable cut, and his face was handsome but strong.

His name, so far as his fellow-travelers knew, was Harvey Wilde. He had plenty of means, and was traveling partly for pleasure and part-

ly on business, the nature of which he did not disclose, but was presumably mining investments.

Opposite to these two were seated—two ladies!

One of them, though probably a few years younger, was sufficiently like the grizzled gentleman to be promptly taken for his sister, even without the introduction he was always quite ready to give. She seemed to be a prying, picking, snappish personage, not absolutely hideous in looks, but by no means handsome. Evidently she had a very good opinion of herself and her family, and was much inclined to be sociable. Miss Lavinia Storm, "sister to the Senator," as she always announced herself, seemed to be something of a character, and hardly the best person in the world to act as guide, guard and mentor for the beautiful young lady beside her.

And the fourth of the inside passengers was beautiful, in spite of the bronzing her originally fair face had received from Western sun and winds.

It seemed strange that the elements had not ruined her complexion; but they had only darkened it, while leaving the bloom there. Her eyes were large, deep blue, and almost melting in the tenderness that seemed their natural expression. In stature, she was under rather than up to the medium height, but was neither fragile nor awkward, so exquisitely was she proportioned. It was really a serious thing for a young, unmarried man to ride a score of miles with her in a stage coach, listening to her prattle, which was sometimes foolishly ignorant, though, again, wonderfully wise. It might even be imagined, from the friendly terms they were on, that Wilde had already been brought under the spell of Miss Aurora, who looked at him with no unfriendly eyes.

The two outside, who had originally climbed to their perch in an unhesitating way that showed that to be their natural place, were civilians of the baser stripe, great, brawny roughs, in coarse flannel and corduroy, with revolvers in their belts, and a limited assortment of bundles, tinware and mining tools, who were bound to the Bar, with the expectation of finding solid, hard work when they got there.

"It's right 'bout hyar that the hearse war held up, eh?" said one of these men, as he looked curiously around the defile into which the stage had plunged.

It happened that the inside passengers were at that moment silent, Miss Lavinia being fast asleep, and as the wheels were grinding along almost noiselessly, every word that was uttered above, was distinctly audible below.

"Yas, this hyar's e'en'most ther spot. Leastwise, it warn't more ner a quarter ov a mile furder on, ef I don't disremember ther locate ov ther side gulch. I war down hyar in ther fust rush, an' war ez big a fool ez ther rest. Ef I hadn't lit out fur Mad Dog, I mou't er bin a millyunair."

"They say it war an orful bloody time," rejoined the first speaker, who did not seem to care for the personal reminiscences of his chance comrade. "I hearn 'em on it, hot, at Rat Trap, whar we war h'latin' in grub."

"Bloody!—that war no name fur it. Thar war five in ther cargo ov that hearse when it struck this hyar gulch, an' ther' war five stiff's, all corled up 'longside ther road when they kin out frum ther Bar, ter see what hed become ov ther mail. An' it war all along ov er foolishness ez would make a boss sick. I tell yer, sich loonatix ez war in that stage, orter hev a g'ardeen, an' be kep' at home."

"How's that? I thort they war a purty solid crowd. They war sayin' ez how they fit ther best they knewed how, an' tuk in more road-agents than war done in any fou't in this section. Thar war a couple corpses found; an' blood enuf on ther trail ter 'count fur two er three more."

"Thet's it. Thet's jist it. Them dead an' wounded did ther crew o' that thar hearse heaps o' good. Oh, yes! Ef they'd held up ther hands peaceably an' shelled out ther plunder, ther boys down et Walnut would 'a' gi'n' em all a starter, an' they might 'a' bin shovelin' out pay gravel on Blue Peter by ther barrel. Now whar is they?"

"Oh, that's so, thar ain't no use ter rear up when them lead-slingers ar' 'round on ther kill. Fork over, an' try fur a new deal somewhar else. Them's ther sentiments ov Poncho Pete—which ar' me—prezactly."

"So Poncho Pete's yer handle. Alligator Abe are mine, an' I'm a elefun on wheels when thar's fun 'round; but nary road-agent in mine. Not much. Then I pass."

"I see yer hev it down fine. I don't reckon thar'll be any foolishness with shootin'-irons ef ther cusses mount us!"

"You bet not—speshully when thar's kaliker 'round. I ain't a hog, nohow; an' I wouldn't play it that low down. Why, it'd be sart'in death, er wuss, ter them; an' mighty slim chance ter us, unless we tuk ter ther bush."

The listeners in the coach looked at each other; and Mr. Storm only half smothered an impatient exclamation.

Miss Aurora turned to her father.

"Do you suppose there is any truth in what those men are saying?"

"I wish they had been hung before they had the chance to ventilate their nonsense. Of course they are right in what they say about what occurred here some time ago, and about the folly of resistance; but I do not think there is the least danger of our meeting the outlaws now. There was an organized pursuit, that effectually drove them out of the country."

"But do you really mean to say," interposed Mr. Wilde, "that a whole stage-full of passengers, well armed as they are likely to be, should adopt the theory of passive non-resistance, and tamely allow themselves to be despoiled of their possessions?"

"That is the part of real wisdom, Mr. Wilde," said Miss Aurora. "It does not look, to the untutored mind of the tenderfoot, like true courage; but it is. When the drop is on you, hold your hands up. And these men always come with the drop."

"But if these desperadoes rob a man, in this out-of-the-way corner of the earth, of all that he possesses, he might just as well be dead. He will starve anyhow, and that is worse than a bullet."

"I see you don't understand our population. The old-timer drops on his feet whichever way you throw him. As for the rest they are of two classes; the men who have means to draw on, and so are willing to sacrifice a little for safety's sake; and the men whose pockets are so empty as to defy even the road agents to find anything worth the powder it would take to defend it."

"So, if we should happen to be attacked, you would counsel perfect non-resistance?"

"I certainly should; and command it, too. One foolish person can bring destruction on not only himself, but the rest of the passengers. I am not at all alarmed at the chances for an adventure; but I recognize the speakers above as very wise in the ways of Arizona."

"Well, I declare, you have given me a new idea about y'ur people. I was under the impression that they were terrible shooters. It seems, however, that with them discretion is the better part of valor; and their revolvers are more particularly intended for family feuds and every-day quarrels."

"Don't be troubled, Mr. Wilde. If you stay among us you will discover that firearms have their uses; but that they are not drawn when a chance bullet will be pretty sure to strike a lady."

"But here are four or five men, all well armed. It does strike me that we ought to be able to beat off a dozen men."

"They would perforate this coach with more holes than a skimmer," said Mr. Storm, authoritatively.

"A vehicle like this is an elegant mark, and three or four men with carbines, from an ambush could slaughter every one of us. I've seen something of the kind done. No, I hold my hands up very high when I hear the order; and whatever plunder they may obtain from me, will be charged to profit and loss, and no more thought about it."

The two outsiders had some time before subsided into thoughtful silence; now the barsh voice of Alligator Abe could be heard.

"We're thar, er tharabouts, pardy. Yander's ther mouth ov ther gulch I war tellin' yer on."

"An' by ther jumpin' horn toad ov Alamoser, thar's yer agents!" answered Poncho Pete. "I felt it in me bones they war comin'."

"Dry up, then, an' let them do ther talkin'."

The other began a response, but it died away into a subdued growl, for, from the roadside, came, in clear, ringing tones:

"Down with yer brakes there, Johnny; an' you outside, hold up yer bands! This hearse stops right hyer till it pays ther toll."

"Down she am!" answered the driver, kicking the bar over, and taking a steady pull on the lines.

At the same time up went the hands of the two outsiders.

The sudden stoppage of the stage was followed by a shrill cry from within. Miss Lavinia had awakened from her sound slumber, and instinctively understood the situation, if her words went for anything.

"Laws a mercy! here's the cut-throats! We're all dead men!"

Then, without an instant's hesitation, she flung herself right forward upon Harvey Wilde, throwing her arms around his neck with a most unseemly screech.

"Ha, ha, ha! Ho, ho, ho! He, he, he!" she continued; and Wilde, despite his limited experience of the softer sex, knew that he had a strong case of hysterics in his hands.

Miss Aurora sat cold and upright. Her face might, perhaps, have paled slightly, and a close observer could have detected a slight tremor of the excitement of anticipation. That was all.

Mr. Storm paid no attention to the rest. When he heard the hail he gave one glance around, jerked from his pocket a white handkerchief, and thrust it from the window, waving it vigorously.

When sufficient time had elapsed for it to

have attracted attention, his head followed; and as his eyes fell upon several masked men, who stood some little distance ahead, with revolvers leveled at Poncho Pete, Alligator Abe and the driver, he exclaimed:

"Here you are, boys! Send your tax collector up to take the collateral. You'll have no trouble with this hearse."

"Just you see, then, that we don't," responded the sharp, ringing voice of the outlaw spokesman. "We don't trust the pilgrims worth a cent since the muss they made here a few weeks ago. Next time we'll shoot a heap sight quicker. Look out now. We're coming, all trimmed and heeled, ready to go in if you kill us."

The road-agent was a cautious man; but from the sample of the cargo in front of him small blame to him if he wanted to impress on the minds of the passengers the folly of resistance. He turned to Poncho Pete and Alligator Abe.

"You galoots can see that you're covered, and you look like men of sense. Just loosen those belts, and chuck them over into the bushes. If you want to waste time you can hunt them up after we're gone."

Without an instant's hesitation the two did as they were ordered.

"Now, all you insiders go and do likewise," continued the agent, with a short laugh. "Be quick about it, too. There's no time for foolishness."

"Certainly, certainly!" sung out Senator Storm. "I don't carry many weapons; and I didn't know that my friend here was heeled at all. Here are our two revolvers. If you want us to pitch our pocketbooks out with them, just say the word. There are only four inside, two male and two female, and there's no U. S. mail. You can clean up here in just no time, and let us go on for our suppers."

"Never mind throwing your bullion bags around loose. They might not be so easy to find. I'll take care of them."

The speaker had advanced toward the coach, and opened the door, while two or three of his comrades stood around, keeping sharp eyes on the outfit. It did not seem as though there could be the least danger.

Yet at the moment the door opened there was a flash and a sharp report.

Then a road-agent, who stood just at the shoulder of the spokesman, threw up his arms and fell, without even an exclamation.

"Curses on them, they've scooped in Carter," exclaimed the outlaw leader. "Who did it? There will be blood for this."

With his fingers on the triggers he held two cocked revolvers pointed into the coach.

CHAPTER III.

HELD DOWN.

THE muzzles of the leveled pistols of the outlaw dropped in line, one with the head of Senator Simon Storm, and the other pointed fair for the head of Harvey Wilde. It looked as though their lives were not worth a cent.

But while the two men gazed at each other, wonder in their eyes, for the hands of both were empty, Aurora leaned forward into range, holding up her hand as she did so.

It contained the weapon that had done the work.

"Hold!" she cried.

"It was I that fired that shot. Hold your hand or I fire another."

"I have you covered. Before your thumbs can draw back those hammers you, at least, will be a dead man. I never miss."

It seemed that, acting on the spur of the moment, she had drawn from its hiding-place a self-cocking revolver, and having taken the snap shot that brought down one of the outlaws she was ready for another, though prudence restrained her.

"I've made one vacancy; don't force me to make another. I may have been mad when I fired that shot, for in cold blood I would never take a human life; but, if I was, there is a leaven of the same madness working still in my veins. Hands up, yourself! If you hesitate I pull trigger. Call off your men or die."

While she spoke, the hammer stood poised by the weight of her finger, just at the bight beyond which if it passed a shot must follow, and there was no mistaking the deadly earnestness of her tones.

To the certainty of her aim the man upon the ground bore witness.

It looked as though there must be a parley, or at least one more agent drop to her revolver.

It all passed with wonderful quickness; the attack, the shot, and the short, sharp words of the two who were now taking the parts of leading actors.

Wilde, at first stunned by the report of the pistol, wrenched the arms of the antique Lavinia from around his neck, without much regard for her hysterical condition; but he was unable to move for the moment; and there came a sudden jerk that shook the four together in a helpless heap, Aurora's bullet flying wild.

There was one way to save the life of the menaced outlaw, and that was taken.

One of the men brought down the whip, that he carried, over the backs of the wheel-horses, at the same time uttering a terrific yell.

The team gave a powerful lunge forward, and then came again to a halt, while the door on the opposite side to the one hitherto menaced was wrenched open. Several shots were fired, apparently at random; there was a general rush, and before Harvey Wilde could gather himself together for resistance, the insiders were outside upon the trail, and a revolver in unpleasant proximity to each head.

All was done without passion, flurry, or excitement.

Resistance over, there was a chance to take full stock of damages, and the leader stooped for the first time to examine the body of his fallen man. He placed his hand over his heart, gave a sudden start, and looked up with a wicked scowl, such as had not yet been on his face.

"Ob, I did it!" exclaimed Aurora, evidently in much excitement. "It was his life or mine, and you know it. I saw death in his eyes, and I saved myself. You wolves can gnaw his bones among yourselves, and thank me for rid-
ing you of a bad man. Empty his pockets, and leave his body here to show what one woman can do in her own defense. If I had not been idiotic enough to counsel the rest before-hand not to resist, we might have beaten you off altogether. I can see who was the fool now."

"Hush, hush, you are surely crazy," interrupted Simon Storm, not too entirely unnerved to take in the full measure of the aggravated danger. "Be quiet, for Heaven's sake, and let us try and get out of this with whole skulls. He, here! it is all a mistake! You don't make such a bad haul, for I've five hundred here, and my friend won't object to giving you his stake. A short horse is soon curried. I'm sorry for the accident; but you've got to take such chances—it's part of the business. Let us pile in and go on to Walnut Bar. There's no use to cry over spilt milk, or have any bad feelings about what has been done by an irresponsible girl."

"Well enough to talk that way—for you. We don't see it in the same light. We have been inclined to treat the traffic on this route as well as is done anywhere else. What's the result. Every idiot that can crook his finger is taking a blaze at us. That may be all right; but it don't suit us. If I was a wicked man like Captain Iron Arm is supposed to be, I would simply hang every soul to these convenient trees, and lay back for the next coach."

"But I'm not that kind. What I want is to fill up the treasury."

"We didn't go into this thing, Simon Storm, without knowing who was coming our way; though we would have been satisfied with a reasonable booty. Now it's different, and you've got to come to time. Twenty thousand dollars is the figure it takes to let you out."

"But I have no such sum as that," began the senator, when he was hastily interrupted:

"Don't suppose you have—with you. But you are good for that amount—you and your friend. And to make sure of it, we will keep your daughter and Mr. Wilde just two weeks, and let you go on to Walnut Bar to raise the ransom. If it's not paid to the dot, and down on time, we'll hang them both. Now you know where they are, and what you may expect. Tumble into the stage, and get to Walnut Bar as soon as you like, while we provide for our prisoners."

There was not a particle of anger or excitement in the tones of the outlaw as he spoke; but there was a world of fixed, settled purpose. Harvey Wilde who listened, shuddered; not for himself, but for the petite, handsome woman who by her recklessness, seemed to have brought this desperate strait upon them.

And yet it might be that this was preferable to what they had escaped. Wilde knew nothing of the slain desperado; or the living either. For that reason he was not qualified to judge.

But whatever were his thoughts, he could effect nothing in Aurora's favor. While the leader spoke, the men acted. The hands of the young man had been deftly bound behind his back, the same had been done for Miss Storm, and now the time for parley was past.

"Hop inter that hearse ef yer don't want me ter open er shaft in yer cabeza, whar they'll find lead in ther bottom ov it."

One of the road-agents advanced toward the senator as he spoke, and emphasized his words by leveling his revolver.

Simon Storm may have had a deficiency of courage—perhaps it was a surplus of common-sense. At any rate he did not attempt to longer debate the question.

With a spring he landed himself through the open door and sunk down quivering upon a cushion, with his face buried in his hands, while a road-agent bundled in Miss Lavinia.

"All set!" exclaimed the outlaw leader.

"Set it ar," answered the other spokesman, who had given the order to the senator.

"Then twirl the jenny."

As the words left his lips the whip descended again upon the blacks of the wheel-horses, and this time the driver, having already thrown off the brake, let them go, urging them away with a wild shout.

The animals dashed frantically forward, and

Harvey Wilde and Aurora were left behind in the hands of the desperate men who clustered around them.

The two outside passengers had been covered during all the time the things just detailed had been going on; but it was altogether to keep them out of mischief. They were hardly worth considering as victims when there was so much larger game afoot.

For a quarter of a mile the horses kept up their break-neck speed, the coach swaying from side to side; and every one was too much concerned about the chance of further disaster to attempt to speak of what had already happened.

But, finally, the driver gave a long, steady pull on the reins, and speaking quietly to his cattle brought them into better control. The run subsided into a stretching gallop, and that into a rapid trot.

Then Poncho Pete made a movement that thoroughly astounded the others. Softly the man swung himself over the edge, and clambered down the side until he hung by one of the standards, his foot resting upon a step.

"Now ease her up a little, Johnny, I'm goin' ter drop off. Ef any galoot axes yer way-bill sing mighty small about Poncho Peter. Ef yer gits him inter diffikilt durned ef I don't kin back yit, an' sculp yer."

"Oh, say! What yer goin' ter do?" asked Alligator Abe, leaning anxiously over the top, and peering downward.

"I'm goin' ter pick up them tools ez I chucked inter ther bushes. Arter I git them I'm goin' whar I kin do that seraphickelous bit er kaliker ther most good. An' when Poncho Pete strikes ther war-path sumbody'll git bu'st wide open. Don't yer furgit it. By-by!"

The man leaped lightly to the road-side, while the vehicle rolled on.

The spot was well out of sight of the outlaws, but he did not seem to want to run any risks. Hardly had he struck the ground when he darted among the shrubbery, and was lost to the view of Alligator Abe, who was watching him with a face full of strange interest.

"Dog-gone my high-heeled ole top-knot, but he's a bu'ster. I don't b'lieve bullets kin stop him when he wades in lemons. But he can't do no good 'cept ter git hisself ready fur a furner'l. I wish I'd tolle him ter bring my shootin'-iron 'long ef he found her. It war too prime er weepin' ter lay thar ter rust an' rot; an' I don't guess I giv' it up altogether yit. We'll see what Walnut Bar sez when they hear what's 'come ov ther likeliest heifer ez ever lit up this hyer section with ther light ov her countenance."

So Alligator Abe communed with himself, the driver whipped up his horses when they flagged, Mr. Simon Storm was busy with his own reflections, Miss Lavinia sat still, like one thoroughly dazed; and taken altogether it was a very solemn-looking little party that reached Walnut Bar that evening, and stopped at Johnny Goodman's.

Miss Lavinia was aided to alight by her brother, and the two entered together.

As they did so, they heard a combination of sounds that caused them to halt, just inside, and stare back toward the long, low building some fifty or sixty yards further down the street.

"It's only some fun down at the Best Chance," said Goodman, bustling up. "Kind ov a leetle circus, ez sets ther boys sort ov wild."

"Fun, you say? What do you mean by 'circus'? I understand that as trouble, shooting, death, and all that. But they seem in good enough humor over there."

"I mean jist what I said. It's a real sorter show; an' it's drawin' ther biggest kinder a crowd. You'd never guess what she are. Thar's a man with a fiddle an' a girl with three b'ars, an' Poison Pete—who's the man what runs ther Best Chance—will have a chance ter p'ay off his bug-juice on three-quarters of the sports in camp. If the stuff don't make cold meat ov some of 'em afore mornin', it'll be 'cause they've got flint-glass insides. That campene ov bissen would burn a hole right through ord'nary cast-iron. But whar's Miss Rora? I understood you war goin' ter bring yer daughter along, an' I fixed fur her, big."

Senator Storm, though a stranger at Walnut Bar, was not altogether unknown to the hotel proprietor, who had had due notice of his coming.

"We've had trouble, Goodman. You ought to see it in our looks. We were held up by Captain Iron-Arm's gang, and the girl must needs act like a fool. They hold her for ransom, and I will have to do my best to raise twenty thousand, which is the amount fixed. I suppose my credit will be good enough if I can find the man with the dust."

Goodman could not repress an exclamation.

"Are yer sure what yer sayin'? Pears ter me thar's something mighty queer about it. Thar's bad men in Iron-Arm's band; but they ain't that kind, unless I'm mighty much mistook."

"It was a bad affair in every way; and more than half-treachery on her part. Though I am her father I must say it. They hold a young friend of mine also, a Mr. Wilde, who was

traveling in our company. I suppose the intention is to make him help if he has any ready money that he can command; but I can only rely on myself. I would keep this all to myself if I could, but as the other passengers and the driver would be sure to let out the particulars of the adventure, I do not think it is worth while to attempt it. Still, say as little as possible about it, for the present, and let us have some supper. By heavens, if they try to crowd me too hard, they'll find there's more in old Simon Storm than they bargain for."

For a moment his voice lost its even tenor, and he spoke in high savage excitement. Then he calmed again, and cut short an attempt of Goodman to gain further particulars. It was plain to see that he had ideas of his own, and did not intend to ventilate them.

CHAPTER IV.

THE CIRCUS OPENS AT POISON PETE'S.

One of the institutions of Walnut Bar, where of late more money changed hands, than in any of the other dens, dives, saloons and temples of fortune, was the "Office."

It was and it was not a public place of resort; being a large room, well furnished, where gambling progressed from dawn to dark and from dark to daylight—if gamblers were on hand. There was, however, no bar; and as a general thing, only those came who were acquainted with the proprietor, or were introduced by some of his friends.

And General Sidney St. George was an anomaly in that anomalous place, Walnut Bar.

He came quietly, took possession of the building, which had already been furnished, and over the front door tacked up a little tin weatherbeaten sign, on which were painted the letters, "OFFICE."

Some days passed, in which the evident proprietor lounged gracefully about, neither seeking nor shunning his fellow mortals, who eyed him suspiciously from a distance.

He was a tall, handsome-looking man, and, for that country, elegantly dressed.

It finally became a question what the profession of the stranger really might be, and after exhausting the different conjectures of doctor, lawyer, chemist, expert, banker, and so on, a self-appointed committee of three headed by Chess Barker, the most gentlemanly looking sport in camp, called for the purpose of investigation.

"Good evening, gentlemen," said the stranger quite affably. "Are you in want of anything, in my line?"

"That's it. You deal us a hand, as soon as you get the deck; and we chip right in. What is your line? That's what the boys want to know. Then if they can give you a boost any way they'll do it, for they want to give everybody a chance to catch on."

For answer the gentleman placed in Barker's hand a strip of pasteboard, on which was printed, in plain, round script:

"GENERAL SIDNEY ST. GEORGE,
Assayist,

Three Doors South of Goodman's Hotel,
WALNUT BAR, A. T."

"Assayist? Well, maybe your time will come, but it's a slim show. For dust they can take a knife-blade, and for quartz the men here got their eye-teeth cut long enough ago to see right into what's there. I hope you've stamps enough to keep you floating till luck comes your way."

"I'm well heeled financially, but I think you don't catch on exactly yourselves. I know rocks when I see them, but I didn't come here to starve. The fact is, I deal the nerviest game of faro out, and consider myself an expert at draw. What I want to assay is the style of the game and the size of the piles down here at Walnut Bar."

"Oh!"

Chess Barker gave utterance to an exclamation of surprise, which was echoed by the rest of his committee.

"Is that it? Well, close up the shutters and set right down. Here's a specimen of the Bar now. We didn't come in on the war-path, but when we hear the shout we take the trail."

"It's not necessary to close the shutters when one is at his legitimate business. What will you have? Shall I spread a lay-out, or do you prefer short cards? If the latter, name your variety."

"Thanks. As you're so kind, how would a little four-handed euchre suit you—you and me to stand Jim and Dan the Drover?"

A dubious sort of smile settled upon Sidney St. George's face.

"You want to feel my points. Thanks from my side. Education that costs little or nothing is not worth much. Such as it is you are welcome to have it. I would suggest five dollars a corner, and only one lone hand in a deal—that your partner can spoil."

The four seated themselves at one of the small tables, and without further parley began manipulating the cards.

Luck was about even all around, the point

following the deal pretty closely, and no mistakes in the playing. When an hour had passed the four were quite well acquainted, and no one had lost a fortune.

"I think it's about time to spread that layout," remarked Barker. "The crowd outside have been taking points, if we haven't, and if they saw a chance would come in."

The general lit a fresh cigar, took his station behind the long table at the further end of the room, spread his cloth with the high card on the side, stacked up his chips, opened out his cue-box, and was ready to begin, being dealer, treasurer, cue-keeper, and looker-out, all in one.

The game opened with a hundred dollars flyer, and double on the turn, and did not seem to be likely to be very interesting for the rushers of Walnut Bar. It was plain, however, that General St. George understood his business.

One after another, outsiders came gliding in, at first simply looking on, but finally working into the game, and, as usual, getting slain.

After that night the general's house could be considered open. The business increased as if by magic, and "The Office" was a recognized institution, haunted by the boldest betters and the most nervy hands at short cards. When the general was not dealing faro, he was always ready to make one of a game.

Only one thing was needful—General St. George was without a record.

He managed his business in such a quiet, suave way that it did not seem as though he had any intention of establishing one. He was undoubtedly thousands ahead, but, up to the time of the arrival in town of Senator Storm there had been no trouble at "The Office."

That evening Chess Barker came lounging in.

"Biz seems to be dull here, to-night. I reckon the lambs have deserted you for once, and if you look for them you'll find them at Poison Pete's. Thought I'd see if you wouldn't go along over and see the fun."

"What fun?" asked St. George, briefly.

Barker and he were on friendly terms and that was all. It was the first time any one had offered to show him around.

"Fun! Well, I suppose that is about what they call it. Some sort of fake at the Best Chance. Though may be you saw them come in—two strolling pilgrims, and three trained bears. Anything for an excuse here. The performance may not amount to much; but we'll all have to go wild over it. You had better take a look. They say one of the party is a girl, and mighty good-looking."

"All right. I'll close the office and meander that way."

There was nothing surprising in this ready assent. There was no one else about, and not much likelihood of any one coming. The two men left together, and made their way to the Best Chance.

It was time that they came if they wanted to find standing-room.

Three-quarters of the large hall was packed with an excited mass of humanity. The other quarter was kept clear by several ropes stretched across from one side to the other of the building.

In the vacant space thus left the performance was going on.

It was not much different from the average exhibition given of such trained animals. The bears were under good control; and their mistress was a fearless adept. Against the wall, within the ropes, and not far away, Lame Luke stood, with folded arms, watching alternately Alta and the audience. He knew well enough that in such a place trouble was likely to arise at any moment.

As the general and Chess Barker entered there was a roar of applause. A moment later, at a look from Alta, Luke Liver shambled to her side, holding in his hand a violin, which he placed lovingly to his chin, and drew the bow across the strings with a peculiar introductory flourish.

Instantly the bears rose upright, and, walking on their hind feet, placed themselves with their backs to the audience, apparently looking at Lame Luke with an earnest gaze.

Then the violin actually talked. Such an artist had never visited the mining regions before; and, indeed, it would have been hard to find a better anywhere. The music went right to the souls of those there.

After a little the sounds softened and grew fainter. Then Alta's voice joined in, sweet, clear and wonderfully well cultivated. Though she was singing the familiar "Last Rose of Summer," nearly every man in the audience stood breathless for fear of losing a note.

At the conclusion of the song the bears bowed in a ludicrous manner to the cantatrice, and then, turning toward the audience, held out their paws in a begging attitude which could not be mistaken.

Into the open space which represented a stage the coin began to shower.

"Wait er minute, gents," called out Lame Luke, raising one hand. "I'm afraid Old Eph, an' his two young pards, wouldn't find it so

easy ter pick 'em up, an' ef it's all 'er same I'll pass 'round ther hat."

"'Round with it, then, double-quick, ole man! This hyer crowd are jist clean gone dead ter h'ar some more, an' thar ain't er man hyar ez ain't willin' ter ante up ter keep ther game goin'. Pass 'round yer cabbage-box an' I'll see no galoot backs down on helpin' ter fill it."

It was Dan the Drover that spoke; and as he was backed by a number of the prominent citizens, the shower of coin ceased; and the hat went around.

Lame Luke finally bore it back well freighted with gold and silver.

While this intermission lasted there was a general move to sample Poison Pete's whisky; but in ten minutes the crowd became clamorous for the show to proceed.

The bears were lying in one corner, sleeping, or gazing sleepily around, and the crowd readily excused them from giving any further assistance. They were amusing enough as long as no one knew that there was something better.

Again Lame Luke took up his violin. For fully half an hour longer the voice of Alta and the violin of Luke Liver entertained the crowd.

Then, when the sounds of applause were ringing loudly, Alta turned to the audience:

"Gentlemen!" she said; and at the sound of her voice the burrah of noises suddenly ceased. "Gentlemen, we have come to Walnut Bar partly to give you the entertainment you have just had the pleasure of witnessing, and partly for private business, that is my own affair. I thank you for your liberal patronage; and I also thank the proprietor of the place for the kind interest he took in our projects and his willingness to allow our humble performance to take place in his house. I hope he has found his own account in so doing. One and all, we wish you a very good-evening."

Lame Luke had been speaking to the performing animals, and the brutes had risen surly to their feet. Now they stood upright, bowed clumsily; and then, in company with Alta and Liver, backed slowly out from a door in the rear of the hall.

As they made their exit, Chess Barker began to look around for the general, but, although he had been there but a short time previous, he was now nowhere to be seen.

"Confound him!" he muttered. "I don't reckon that it was much of a show to him—for if I'm not mistaken he's lately from places where they do such things up in style—but as he came in with me, he might have let me know he was going out. For half a cent I'd hunt him up and talk Spanish to him. I wonder where the girl and her pard are going to, anyhow? If half the burg don't take hold of the same job, I believe I'll look a little out and see."

The spectators might have shown more curiosity, if they had not supposed it was a foregone conclusion that the pair were to stop at Poison Pete's.

He had a room or two at his disposal, and sometimes accommodated casual boarders in a rough sort of way.

Barker was one of the few who suspected that the girl would not be willing to put up with the risks and accommodations she would find there if she could do better.

As Poison Pete was not one of his friends, Barker wasted no time asking questions of him, but worming his way through the crowd, slipped out and looked eagerly around.

He had not been mistaken.

In the course of a few moments he saw a female figure emerge from the private door of the building, and after halting for a hasty glance around, turn and hurry away in the direction of Johnny Goodman's hotel.

The distance between the two buildings was a mere trifle, and one would have scarcely thought there could be any danger in attempting to traverse it. Chess Barker did not think so, nor did he have the least intention of obstructing himself upon the young woman.

He had been moved to look after her simply out of curiosity; now he moved away at his ordinary gait, intending to drop in at the office, which he had no doubt he would find open.

As he went he kept his eye upon the figure, because he had nothing else to do.

But half-way to Goodman's, he saw the girl suddenly halt and wheel.

Then, from behind the neighboring shanty, three men sprung out.

It was a well-planned ambuscade. Before she could raise a finger in defense the woman was a captive, one of the men bastily forcing a gag in her mouth, and another deftly slipping a pair of handcuffs over her wrists, while the third, whose grip upon her waist had held her as though in a vice, flung her over his shoulder.

Then the trio disappeared as if by magic, though Barker knew that they had simply sprung into the shadow of the shanty.

The spectator had his pistols out like a flash, but did not fire for fear of hitting the girl. He sprung forward, however, giving a great shout as he went.

Then as they disappeared he heard the sharp crack of a revolver, almost echoed by a smooth-edged cry.

In front all was still, but behind him the partisans of the Best Chance came trooping out in an excited mob.

The shout of Chess Barker had brought them to the rescue.

CHAPTER V.

A GOOD MAN TO TIE TO.

It looked like a very clear case against Tombstone Tom and the young man in velvet.

A dozen men there seemed to be in the gang, and each with a revolver ready. No sane man would think of resistance under such circumstances.

The tough who hailed from Tombstone threw his hands up with a readiness that bespoke utter submission.

"Don't shute! Hold on thar! fur ther luv o' mercy, don't shute! We knock under 'ithout a word."

His voice, pitched in a high, earnest key, was drowned in the sharp crack of firearms.

Where they came from, the very men who had him covered could not have told; but Magic Mike made just one motion with his arms.

That movement was out, instead of up, and two little spouts of flame seemed to flash from his outstretched hands, and two of the outlaws dropped, each bored squarely through the forehead.

Then Marshall, leaping backward and upward, threw a quick somersault, while Tombstone Tom flung himself straight to the ground, both escaping the volley that rang out in response to this unexpected move.

There was a shout and a rush as Marshall landed among the mesquites, the nearest of the outlaws plunging straight in after him, and the noise of a few straggling shots was heard; but those who were left behind were afraid to risk another volley, for fear of injuring their own comrades.

Accordingly they threw themselves on Tombstone Tom, who had doubled himself up like a possum in a corner, who thinks a little judicious shamming of death may postpone that unpleasant climax for an indefinite period.

He was dragged to his feet without delay or care in the handling.

"You infernal scoundrel!" said one of his captors, coolly placing the muzzle of a cocked revolver against his forehead. "Who was that man and who are you?"

"That man an' me ain't in ther same boat, an' don't you furgit it. I war jist watchin' fur a chance ter lay fur him meseif. He's an ordinary galoot, ez once put a hemp neck-tie on yours truly, an' I'd jist glory ter send him up ther spout. Now, you bet yer stamps on that. An' I'd a' did it, Glory Aun Jemimer Ann, but I'd a' did it if you-uns hed staid out till I filled my hand."

"That does not answer my question," interrupted the outlaw, sternly.

The man from Tombstone seemed willing to talk by the day if he had the chance, and then not say much.

"Who are you? Speak quick. There's something familiar about your voice or I would have let drive long ago. If you are as big a villain as you look, the sooner Arizona is rid of you the better it will be for honest road-agents. There will be something left for the toll-takers."

"Good my lord, that's about the line I foller when I'm at my best hold. Tombstone Tom are my handle, an' ef yer bin cavortin' 'round these regions long yer must hev heard on it."

"Tombstone Tom! You lie, old man, he was hung for horse-stealing!"

"That war me, every time, an' yander cuss, ez salivated yer two men an' then skipped, war ther man ez did it. Magic Mike he are—ther Man ov Frills, ez they uster call him. I ain't seen him from that time ter this, but I bin a-kerryin' ther books all posted, an' I war goin' ter close up atween hyer and Wa'nut Bar."

"Magic Mike! No. You have overshot the mark all around, for he too is dead."

"A healthy ole dead 'un he are. Mebbe it's ther regular thing fur corpses ter lay out ther stiffs like that. If it are, it's a mighty good thing he ain't alive. An' ef you ain't Funny Fred, the hero ov Angels, I hope I may never crook me elbow ag'in. Oh, I know you good; an' ef I wa'n't on a sure enough thing a'ready, I'd just hold out me hand and say, 'Fardy, put her thar.'"

At the mention of the name of "Funny Fred," the outlaw gave a slight, but perceptible start. If, however, his face showed any sign of confusion, the semi-darkness hid it. Before Tom of Tombstone had ceased speaking, he was himself again.

Perhaps he spoke a trifle more sharply. That was all.

"It is a lie from beginning to end. You are rattling your red rag here to give your pard a chance to escape. Put we have you."

"Hope I may die ef every word I spoke warn't pure, onadulterated truth!"

"Curses on it, the man that was with you was a thief-taker, and you are in partnership with him, playing the same desperate game. If you know anything about prayers, say them now. Whether they find him or not, you will

die like a dog, at the end of a rope, before the end of the next ten minutes."

"Say, you wouldn't go back on an old pard like that?" whined the bummer. "Why, durn yer skin, Wilse Wharton, d'yer think I've forgot yer?"

The change in the manner of the outlaw chief did not appear to altogether unnerve the captive. If he had set up a game he seemed bent on playing it out.

But the answer that came could leave him little hope.

"Lightnings blast you; you are no pard of mine, you whisky-soaked, cowardly dead-beat. Do you know why they hung you—if you are the fraud they put up for a trip out of the wet at Red Earth? You were strung up because you were all ready to peach as soon as the buyer could settle up the price. I'll fix that now, and make a sure job of it."

"Here, you two, up with him! Throw a lariat over yonder limb and string him up. Funny Fred wants no such friends around Walnut Bar; and as for Wilse Wharton, he's of the same opinion."

Tombstone Tom made the rapid movement he should have made some minutes sooner.

As the outlaws spoken to took a step toward him his hands dropped under his ragged coat-tails, in search of the revolvers that were there.

But at the same time a running-noose was flung over him from behind, that settled down to his elbows, and then tightened at a sudden jerk. He had not noticed the two men who had stepped into the trail just behind him, and who, at a signal from their leader, had stood quietly waiting and listening.

"That settles it. You always were an infernal coward; but when you got into a box you dove for your sixes in just that way. I have you foul, Tom Burke; and I'll keep you so. Up he goes."

The chase for Mike Marshall had proved utterly unsuccessful.

Magic Mike was sufficiently a conjurer to disappear.

In among the mesquites, bright moonlight though it was, it was folly to look for a trail; and if he fled his footsteps made no sound by which he could be followed.

The road-agents had all returned and were grouped around, waiting for orders. Understanding the wishes of Captain Wharton, if such was his name, they were not slow to act.

Another turn or two of the lariat was taken and a knot made, securely pinioning the prisoner's arms.

"It kinder sp'iles ther rope; but it's ther quickest way ter do up biz, an' I reckon ther captain's in a hurry."

So the acting executioner said, as he slashed off the lariat, and made another loop, which he hastily placed around the neck of the vagabond, the loose end being then flung over the limb of the tree as had been ordered.

The end had not dangled half a dozen seconds before it was caught by willing hands, and up into the air rose the unfortunate from Tombstone, who the moment he had found death apparently inevitable, was silent as a wolf in a trap, watching with the same hungry, anxious stare, but never making the least struggle.

The time had come for him to die game, and he was all there. Up into the air he went, a helpless, dangling, silent mass of strangling humanity, while the end of the lariat was knotted to a sapling.

"There you are," said Funny Fred, coldly, and waving his hand toward the hanging man.

"If you had tried to tell some things that you might have begun with I'd have stopped you with a bullet. Now for the other. He has two good men to pass before he reaches Walnut Bar, and it's odds that he goes in out of the draft yet."

"But not by your hands, Funny Fred! Die here and now!"

The voice was the voice of Magic Mike, and it rung out sharp and clear on the night air; but upon the other side of the trail from the spot where he had disappeared.

And as if to punctuate the words, or more properly, as a period, there came a single pistol-shot, followed almost instantly by a rattling volley, that sounded like a fire by file. If one man was working the racket he was an expert, such as even Arizona seldom saw.

To that first shot another man dropped, with a hole in his forehead; and then, somehow, though each of the outlaws drew a revolver, every man save the leader fell flat, forward. The following swarm of bullets went over with-out damage, while half a dozen shots went pelt-ing back in return, aimed at the flashes among the mesquites.

"Ha, ha, ha! And that's the gang that would take in Magic Mike. Day-day! I'm for Walnut Bar."

There was a plunging rush, as Funny Fred, who had remained uninjured, led his men into the bushes; but again the cunning conjurer outwitted them, and doubly, for, as the outlaw chief disappeared upon one side of the trail, Tombstone Tom went out of sight upon the other.

In the flurry that succeeded that first shot, no

one had noticed a knife that had been flung across the trail, aimed straight at the rope by which the man was suspended.

True to its aim it struck and severed the rope, but the noise of Burke's fall was drowned by the rattle of the revolvers that began again with such marvelous quickness.

Without waiting an instant the man gathered himself up, apparently not much the worse for his temporary suspension, and darted away. Even Mike Marshall could not have known for a certainty whether he was living or dead, since he had disappeared unnoticed, though no doubt he could have very strong suspicions.

Magic Mike had taken very heavy risks, and was evidently a good man to tie to.

CHAPTER VI.

THE SPHINX BEGINS TO SCRATCH THE TIGER.

"WHAT confounded kind of a procession is kept up on this trail to night, anyhow? 'Kits, eats, sacks and wives; how many have I met going to Saint Ives?'

The speaker was Magic Mike, the man in velvet, who had been dodging around the trail, and unmolested, was nearing Walnut Bar, which lay just below him, its numerous lights shining dully in the moonlight.

He had been but lately passed by several horsemen going at break-neck speed, who came upon him from the direction of the Bar so suddenly as almost to run him down.

As he was a pedestrian, and possibly not easily seen by the riders, he took no affront, but nimbly hopped out of the road.

Yet, as they dashed by he had his suspicion that there was something more in the little squad than a few honest miners going home after an evening of it in the camp he was about to enter. He even imagined that he heard a smothered cry.

"Somebody else, like enough," he continued, "that knows Mike Marshall. Wonder they didn't try a shot for good luck, anyhow. Pity I've lost sight of Tombstone Tom; but I guess he'll turn up again, like all bad money usually does. He knows a thundering sight, and I'll bet rocks has some little game on foot."

"Nervet Drunken beat though he looks to be, he has oceans of it; and a tongue tht can spin lies faster than Bodine can trot. I'll bet I'm not done with him yet; but I hope he won't block me out. He can't be the simon-pure Tom Burke; yet who would be willing to bet that he wasn't? About as safe as a cat hop in skin-faro. Never mind, I'm tired and hungry, besides being not far from broke. I'll run the chances. Amen!"

Magic Mike quickened his pace, and as he passed within the straggling outskirts of the town he again heard a rush of horsemen coming toward him.

This party was not moving in silence either. There were shouts, whoops and yells, with an occasional revolver shot.

"Toughs on a tear, I reckon. A good chance for a riot, that I'd better leave out. Ammunition is scarce and I've had business enough tonight to satisfy an ordinary gluton. We'll wait till the cloud rolls by. Maggie."

He turned aside from the trail, and crouched in the shadow of a neighboring shanty, while the little throng swept on. It was a contingent from Walnut Bar in pursuit of the abductors, for the show at Poison Pete's was out.

Then he made his way down until, at last, he came to Johnny Goodman's.

He noticed that there was an excitement at the Best Chance; but as he might well suppose, from the looks of the place, that there was always an excitement there, he did not pause to investigate. Hunger will drive a man right along; and it drove him. For half an hour or so he forgot all about road-agents, sham detectives and the like, and the amount of provender he stowed away made the waiter stare.

He did not finish, but he became full, and quit under protest. Sauntering out into the bar-room—for the Traveler's Rest bad that necessary adjunct—he lit a cigar and turned to Goodman.

"Say, this is a little slow. Do you ever go 'round any? I should judge there's fun here, if a man knew just where to look for it, and if you ever strike the war-path I wish you'd take me that way now."

"Could 't do it. It's ag'in' my principles. But you don't look like a young man to get lonesome in a crowd, if you know which way they're driftin'. There's 'The Office,' just three doors south. If you want ter shuffle ther paste-boards, or buck against faro, General St. George can give you all ther satisfaction you want. And if it's a bowlin' big time you're after, camphene by the quart an' pistols for a dozen, there's Poison Pete's shebang, on the other side. Oh, I tell you, you don't have ter go far for fun in Walnut Bar."

"I don't run much to bug-juice of the benzine order, and cutting and slashing of the Best Chance stripe. I think I'll make a call at The Office. And if anybody comes around wanting Magic Mike, or Mike Marshall, tell them I'll be here or hereabouts before morning. I'm off."

Goodman looked doubtfully after his guest.

Once he made a half-step as if about to follow. Then his foot fell where it had before rested, and he said to himself:

"What business is it of mine? Let him paddle his own canoe. From his looks I should judge he was able to make the rifle. If he ain't what's the use to say anything? But I swear I would like to know who he is."

Probably the reader thinks as Goodman did, that Magic Mike was well able to take care of himself; and the young sport had the same idea. It was not physical fear that made him prefer The Office, but a consideration of dollars and cents.

He found the place open and the bank busy. Strolling up to the table, after watching the run of the cards for the rest of the deal, he began to bet, carefully and in small amounts.

Luck was with him. Dollar after dollar he raked in.

General St. George was dealing, with the extremely liberal flyer of five hundred dollars though no one went anywhere near it; and his luck, except with the dashing young stranger, was good enough, so that the success of the latter, very soon became marked.

He had won five stakes of five dollars, lost one, and then won one of the twenty dollars.

"Twenty dollars on the queen. I'm sorry I can't hit you harder; but I'll be going for you soon, if the cards keep coming my way, see if I don't."

"No doubt, no doubt," smiled the general. "But by the time you run a shoestring up to a fair stake I've generally observed that the luck has gone out. And to-night this bank closes at ten o'clock. I've got a business engagement that won't keep. Maybe you can pick up somebody at short cards, though. The room will still be open."

"My luck to a T. All right, pull your cards, and I'll press the game while I have the chance."

St. George drew the cards, one by one, with a methodical evenness that betokened no haste, settling several small bets as he went along; but it took some time to reach the queen. When it came it won for Magic Mike.

"Forty dollars continues to reside there," remarked the sport in velvet, as he shoved the checks together on her painted majesty.

"Queen wins," remarked the dealer coldly. "One chance left for a fortune. The ace is in the door and a turn in the box. Will you call?"

"Thanks; the forty just makes a stake. You double the limit on the call, of course. Ace, tray and Jack will hit you to the tune of four thousand—eh?"

From his breast pocket Marshall drew a wallet which he emptied on the table. Its contents, with what he had won, just made up the thousand, with perhaps a dollar or two to spare.

"There's my pile. If you rake it in I'll have to leave my sixes with Johnny Goodman, for I'll be dead gone broke. Pull the cards, and pull 'em steady."

For the first time a faint trace of excitement seemed to glimmer in the face of St. George; but he recovered himself and gave no answer. Only his thumb rested for an instant on the ace, as he glanced around the table.

Every one was looking curiously at the stranger; and no one cared to bet, though there were three chances to win.

Then the dealer, with a dry smile on his face, drew the cards one after another from the box, and sure enough they came, ace, tray and jack.

"Who the deuce are you?" queried the banker, in his smiling way.

"I'm the man the boys call Magic Mike, because I always win; but I swear—"

Marshal passed his hand over his face as though in some perplexity, and then gathered up his winnings as the general pushed them over toward him.

"You were going to say you couldn't see why I didn't spring the cards. My dear fellow, how could I when it was a square deck, and I made just twenty-six turns? I had nothing to spring. It's an honest game we play here, at the office; yet you're the first man that has got away with it! If this thing keeps on I'll have to lower my limit. Meantime, you were in luck. The clock strikes ten and the bank closes. I hope to see you to-morrow night, or you can make yourself at home here until I get back. That may be late, or it may be early. If the latter I would like to try your strength in a little game of draw. Here is my friend, Barker, who would no doubt be willing to amuse you."

"Thanks. I don't think I can wait. I'll see, though. It's a long time till morning. Happy to meet you, Mr. Barker. You're not altogether a stranger."

"Well, I'll be hanged, if I'm sure if I can place you. I'd swear you were a fraud if it wasn't for one thing."

Mr. Barker spoke frankly, and he apparently gave no offense, for Marshall answered in the same easy, bantering tone:

"Why would you do that; and what is the redeeming feature?"

"Magic Mike always won; and that seems

about your gait. Tuey barred him out of every game before he had struck camp an hour if they knew him; though he used to get in his work in spite of it. Down on Feather river, somewhere, they say he came in with a rush, worked with a shovel and rocker till there were some big piles made, and then, one night, he dealt out of hand and scooped in five thousand ounces. *Five thousand ounces!* That night they took him in, scooped him, put him through the flume. They just naturally killed him and divided the spoil; and that's the reason why I say you can't be the Magic Mike that I knew of. But you may be his brother; and if you're only his second cousin I don't care about having any of it in mine. I'll play you High, Low, Jack for a dollar a corner till the general comes back; but to do anything better—I swear, I tell you, I'm afraid."

General St. George had departed immediately upon giving his introduction, so that he did not hear this statement.

Several of the bystanders did and it increased their respect for the lucky winner. He was so certainly a stranger in the camp, and had so clearly come into the game after the cards had been shuffled, that it was positive he had won on his luck. No chance had there been to sand the dealer's cards, or ring in a cold deck by means of an arm-strap, or any such little appliances that have been invented to beat faro.

Of them, however, few, if any, among the spectators knew much beyond a vague suspicion of their existence.

But some had heard of Magic Mike, though now seeing him for the first time, and they listened with some curiosity to hear what answer he would make Chess Barker.

"There's a general resurrection," he said, with a laugh. "I met with a dead man on the road—you'll see his corpse coming in by and by, no doubt—and I'm another. If you want to amuse yourself at seven-up, I'm monstrous accommodating. If you've got a better hold, name your vanity."

"All-fours will do for me. It's only a summer game, till the general gets back."

Barker always was a cautious player with a man he suspected of being an adept; but whether it was to feel his adversary, or to put him off his guard, the boys never knew, as he made no confidences, and kept on in the even tenor of his way, for the most part winning moderately, and now and then making a big strike. The two sat down at one of the small tables, and began to play with a pack that was in the drawer.

The cards ran smoothly enough, though they had been used before, and bore some little trace of service. For the first game or so, when it was Marshall's deal, he seemed to have a desire to run the cards.

He never gave, always begged, and on the run insisted on three at a time. In a very little while every card in the pack had gone through his hands.

Then he laughed:

"My friend, if you play with your cards faced I can't see that it's foul to take advantage of it. That's just the percentage I have on you; now, what have you got on me? There's one thing I have, and that's a memory for cards. I can tell those thumb-marks on the backs as far as I can see them. That's the reason I stick to faro. I want to give the other side a show for their money."

Barker turned over his cards, and looked at the backs.

They were just a little worn, and perhaps by study he would be able to recognize some of them again, but it did not seem possible that any living man would be able to learn the whole deck, and he said so.

"You're drawin' your leg over the house. I know something about cards—I've studied them since I was knee-high to a duck—but that's something that can't be done."

"I'll call them as I deal for a hundred dollars a card."

"Done. I'll swear they're not stamp-backs, and no man living can make a stake out of that in the time you've held them. It would take me a week, and then I'd have to begin again. You might pick out a couple to begin with."

"Don't be sure. They call me Magic Mike, and it will cost you just fifty-two hundred for the diversion."

"Then you've got something else besides cards to travel on, or you'd never give it away. I'll take water. When a man has stamps to back what he says, I don't crowd him higher than it's worth to learn his game. He don't go traveling 'round to run the good philanthropist dodge and stake deserving old sport. If the fools in the world would just jot that down, who would want to run the strap game, or deal three-card monte? I'll bet you a dollar a card, fer I'd give a slug to see the thing done."

"All right. Bet your finger; here's your deal."

Deftly he ran the cards together, and with practiced rapidity began to deal them in four piles. Then each of these piles he sorted over with as little delay, all the time keeping the backs toward him.

"Spades, hearts, clubs and diamonds! Take

a sight for your money, and then shell out. I want to give it to you straight."

Mr. Barker took up the pack; and found the cards as Marshall had called them, arranged from ace up. He looked at the backs again, and saw nothing there.

"All right, I owe you forty-six dollars. You've made six mistakes, and that's big money. I think you can hold the general even, though since he's come here we've had to play poker with a flyer."

A buzz went around among those near the table. The chances were that if St. George came back within a reasonable time they would see the champion game, if two such sports sat down with a table between them.

Half an hour went by, in which the two shuffled the cards lazily, and went on with the game in a listless manner.

Then the door opened, and General St. George entered. In his company was an elderly-looking man, who gave a keen glance around him. Evidently he saw no familiar face, and the gentleman was as plainly a stranger to those present. The reader will recognize him when told that he was one of the late arrivals in the stage—Senator Storm.

"Just in time!" sung out Chess Barker.

"In another five minutes I would have jumped the game. I've been holding our mutual friend, the new arrival; but I tell you the fun didn't pay for the pleasure. If you want him you can have him, and you'll find him just the healthiest old pard that ever thumbed a prayer-book. I'm dying to see the fun."

"Thanks for your kindness, Barker; but really I'm not in the vein to-night, and if the gentleman will come again, I could offer him more amusement. I've made a little investment in real estate since I left, and the buck-skin is not in condition to stand a vigorous campaign."

"Well, if that ain't the biggest streak of luck you ever struck. Why, he's just a Sardineapolis of the deck, and don't you forget it. I'd really have smiled to see him take your necktie; but it ain't so to be. I think I'll be moving now."

The general never winced.

"Finders are keepers at the office, and I guess our friend won't squeal if he goes out five thousand ahead of the game. I wouldn't. It's not a question of nerve, but of money. It takes stamps to buy land or play draw."

"Bless my soul, that's my besetting sin."

Senator Storm spoke hastily and in earnest, moving up to the table.

"I think I would have been one of the millionaires of the day if I could have kept my surplus change from floating away on a king high. It seems a sin to let a man go out with five thousand when he could double or lose. Introduce us, general. I feel in the vein just this very minute."

Indeed, he looked like it.

His keen eyes sparkled, and when he held out his hand it shook with nervous anxiety. He looked at the gentleman and the cards, and placed his hand restlessly on his breast, as if feeling for the well-filled wallet that was there.

"Mr. Marshall, Senator Storm. Happy to make you acquainted, gentlemen; but, senator, I hardly expected you to drop into a thing like this. There is an uncertainty about draw, and just now you have a peculiar place for your surplus funds. If you will allow me to advise you, we'll put off this meeting for a few days. Then I can join in and will have a battle royal for the championship of Arizona."

"I'm not a boy. I've twenty thousand in my pocket, and I borrowed it from you. If you're afraid of the security, give me the mortgage back and take your money. I don't want any half-way work. Excuse me, Mr. Marshall; but the fact is, I am a little peculiarly situated, and was forced to procure a loan. I didn't mortgage my free will at the same time, however."

He spoke fiercely at first, his voice toning down as he turned toward the man in velvet, though it still showed some excitement.

"It's only on account of the purpose for which you applied for the loan," answered the general, with studied coldness. "If you choose to run the risks, here is a fresh pack of cards and a table. Go in and win."

With a smile of restored urbanity, Storm sunk into the proffered seat. He was willing to take the chances and the game began.

CHAPTER VII.

DRAW—ON ICE.

BARKER looked on with longing eyes. The fact that he had lately deposited permanently in General St. George's bank a large portion of his surplus cash might explain his caution. Yet the temptation was too great for him, as Magic Mike nodded gravely, and he chipped in with his say:

"If you will play a hand or two with a buck, and a moderate-sized limit for us two, the general and I will come in—long enough to get acquainted anyhow. Say a dollar for ante and two hundred for the limit."

"All right; any kind of a game; but if you raise the limit on a hand you've got to see what's offered, up to the size of your pile. I'm

not an avaricious cuss; just say what you think you can afford on economical draw. You can have what your cards are worth, and the senator and I will play the rest of the game. I judge he's a rustler."

"I love the game. That is all that I can say; except that, in the long run, I expect to keep about even. We will cut for deal. Ah, you have it. Ante up and pass the buck. This is worth living for."

The ante had fallen to Barker. He threw a dollar on the table, and then, for a buck, laid down a shining little derringer that he took from his vest pocket.

After a brief consultation about the value of hands, the game went on according to its manner, when played, by arrangement, in such a shape.

For three or four hands no one held anything to justify any heavy betting, and as everybody passed the blind, there was little lost or won.

Then the cards began to run better, though the betting kept within the limit, and Barker and the general were with the rest, every time.

"Time for a little blind; if that's worth anything in a tin-pot game like this. I'll risk one hundred dollars on my luck. If you fellows don't want to come in I'll be a dollar ahead anyway."

The general, who sat next to Marshall winced at the words but promptly straddled the blind, throwing two hundred into the pot. The rest made good, and the game went on.

Marshall asked for one.

"I might as well stand pat," remarked the general. "I've got up the limit and—well—I guess I'll take one, anyhow. Might hit an ace in the draw, you know."

Marshall laughed at the coincidence when Storm followed suit by making a demand for only one card.

Barker kept his hand as he found it.

"I'll wait," remarked Marshall.

The general's face was as solemn as a funeral as he slowly looked over his cards.

"So will I. When you all get done with your frolicking I'll show my hand to back the limit."

"And I value mine at a hundred more anyhow," said Storm, cautiously.

"I'm in the same boat with the general," was Barker's tune, and then Marshall raised the senator a hundred.

As far as faces went the two were inscrutable as the sphinx. Steadily, however, the amount at stake increased, until there was five thousand on the board, and the end not yet, to all appearances.

Then Magic Mike, with a careless laugh answered a raise of the senator.

"I've got you down fine, old man. You're on a sure thing. Good-morning!"

"What do you mean, sir?" asked the senator, a little hotly.

"That your hand is better than mine. I'll give a hundred extra to see it, though. Here. I call. Gentlemen, show out."

Marshall threw his cards on the table. All that he held was a pair of kings. He had tried for a straight flush and missed it.

St. George had an ace at the head—he had drawn on the same off chance and missed it. Barker had four deuces, and the senator half ashamed—for it seemed that he must have betrayed himself in some way—laid down an ace full.

"Gentlemen," said Barker, with a sigh, "I've cut my nose off so often with good resolutions, that it takes a telescope to find my proboscis. I am seven hundred and fifty ahead and Senator Storm's full takes the balance."

"That's the size of it," put in Marshall. "Somebody must win at draw or the game wouldn't pay. Push it along. It's getting toward bedtime, and I've had a rough old tramp to-day."

"Oh, you can go to bed when you can't go anywhere else. The night is young, and actually, I feel like a boy again. Ante up and shave the buck."

The senator was inclined to be frisky.

"It's getting mighty dry for corn," interposed Barker, uneasily. "St. George won't keep a private vial. Suppose we go over to Poison Pete's and saturate."

"For a poker-player I must say—" began Storm. Then he changed his mind and commenced to shuffle. As the deal proceeded the talk ceased.

This hand St. George and Barker retired early, leaving the other two to fight it out.

As a result Marshall raked in the pot; and took three more hand running, winning ten thousand dollars within the next half-hour. Luck was running his way all the time.

"He's bad medicine for you here, senator. We'd better try a turn at Poison Pete's, and when we come back we'll change the chairs."

"What's the matter with you to-night, Barker? You won't play yourself or let anybody else play? I'm not very much interested myself, and as I'm the loser I guess no one will object if I jump the game. I'll go along over to the Best Chance, if you're bound to go; and we'll leave these two to wrestle it out."

"That's sense, and it wouldn't hurt if the rest

would take the same view. Fact is, it isn't my night on. And I want to find out if there's any return from the little girl they picked up. Business is business; but if the night air wasn't so bad for the hole in my chest I'd have been off on the trail myself."

"What girl is that?" asked Marshall, looking up, a hard smile on his lips.

"A girl that came in with three bears and a fiddler they called Lame Luke. They gave a little show over at the Best Chance in the early part of the evening, and after it was over some galoots grabbed her."

"Ab! what then?"

"Nothing," quickly interposed Storm. "It's all a yarn to break up the game. There was no girl, no Lame Luke, no three bears. Come, I'm ten thousand out, and I've got to make or break before I leave. I don't play Injun, and I don't have it played on me."

"Oh, don't rile. I've no doubt our friend here will stick to you till the last horn blows, or your money runs out. He'll be a fool if he don't, for I tell you he has the strength. But as for the girl, it's honest, disgraceful truth, and I thought you'd have heard of it. It's the talk around town, and there's fifty men on the trail, or looking for it. I saw the thing myself."

"What was it? Speak out, man. Can't you give us a straight story? How was it?"

Marshall was more than ever interested, and half-started to his feet.

"There ain't much of a story to tell. She was handsome as a picture, and wasn't so crazy as to take Poison Pete's grub when she had the stamps to put up at Uncle Johnny's. The fellow they call Lame Luke hung on there, though, and while he was putting away the cubs she was fool enough to slip off, alone, for Goodman's."

"Three men just lit down on her and tooted her off. I got my irons out, but was afraid to fire for fear of plugging her, though some one did pump in a shot or two."

"The crowd took the matter up, but I'm afraid they'll be no good. Then the other bear-tamer, he took the biggest of the cubs and started out on the war-path. I should judge he would be a mighty bad man to meet just now, though there's no telling. There's something queer about the whole condemned affair. What's the matter with you?"

Marshall was on his feet, as he sprung transferring his money, that had been on the table at his elbow, loosely into his pocket.

"The villains! They'll have Mike Marshall on their track. This game will keep. Good-night, gents, if you don't go along. I'm off."

"Hold on!"

Senator Storm was on his feet, too, his eyes flashing, his hand extended.

"I've something to say. The game will not keep. I've lost too much or too little, and I demand a chance to get even."

He stood before Marshall barring the way, just as the man in velvet was about springing away. The latter shouted hoarsely:

"Out of the way; you can't play draw with me. If you stand in my path I'll try drops."

"And I hold it. You infernal piker, hands up, or I'll blow you dead."

With the speed of thought, Storm caught up Barker's derringer, that still lay on the table, and cocking it as it came, he snarled out these words as he thrust it against the breast of his lately successful antagonist.

The half-dozen spectators were on their feet, also; but they made no movement to interfere. Only the players knew the rights of the case, and they seemed stunned by the savage quickness of the man. From his looks they would never have believed him capable of such rapid work.

For only a second or two Marshall braced himself, as if he expected the shot to drill him; then he acted as suddenly as had the older man.

He threw his hands up, but at the same time executed a half-wheel on his left heel, while his left hand went forward like a shot, grasping the wrist of the senator in a vise-like grip.

The hammer fell with a sharp stroke distinctly audible, but no report followed. Had there been one, it would have been the herald of no danger, since the muzzle of the derringer was already upturned. Now the revolver drawn by Mike Marshall's right hand came swinging up into line.

"You infernal idiot!" he hissed. "Do you want me to kill you? I've no time to waste here now, or I'd count you back your money if you knew how much it was. I'll see you again and play you draw till you're sick to your toenails; but now I must go. Hands up, and stand aside!"

"You dare not stay and give me a chance to win my money back—the money that I must have for my child. Villain! Coward! Thief! Shoot if you dare!"

And though Senator Storm seemed so wildly excited that his voice rose into a thin, treble scream, yet a keen observer would have seen that he was watching Marshall with the eye of a lynx, intent on an opportunity.

"A coward, am I? If you were not an older man than I, I'd slay you where you stand. I'll give you one chance for your money if you'll

pledge your honor not to take me foul. I can't run my bank and watch a kicking little tiger like you."

"Do it if you dare! I pledge you my honor. Name your game. I'm a fool for trying my luck against a gambler's skill, but you can't make me take water. Come! The shorter, the better. Make your words good if you are a man."

"I'll take your word because there are gentlemen here that will make you keep it. And here's my game. If you had twenty thousand when we began, my pile is the largest. Put up your stakes."

As he spoke, Marshall again emptied his pockets on the table, moving with the rapidity of something acted on by a steel spring, but all the time deadly cool. He threw out a great heap of gold, silver, and notes, a silk handkerchief, and a pair of revolvers.

"Here's your game. Here's a pistol that I empty of its contents. Here's another loaded all square. I throw them up into the air, turn them and twist them so that you don't know the one from the other, and cover them with that handkerchief. Take your choice now, and take it mighty quick. We'll draw and fire across the table. The man that gets the loaded gun gets away with the stamps, and has a chance to pay for a wooden overcoat for the one that gets left. There's your game—play it if you dare!"

"I dare!" echoed Storm, drawing out his wallet and planking it down on top of Magic Mike's money, like lightning darting his left hand under the handkerchief and seizing the nearest revolver.

But at the same time almost, he threw his right hand up and then downward with a snap.

There was not another man in camp that he would not have taken in: but Magic Mike was on the alert, and played again the game of only a few moments before.

His keen, glittering eyes had watched every movement of the man before him. Though Senator Storm took a step backward as he raised the revolver, Marshall as quickly had leaped with his knee on the table, and caught the right wrist of his adversary in his left hand, while with his right he swung up the second revolver from the table, just as the revolver in Storm's hand began to click uselessly.

"I have you!" ground out Marshall. "Curse you, you'd stock the cards even in that game. Move an inch and you're a dead man. I have the loaded revolver. Gentlemen, you see the gouge. He drew his derringer with his right, held it up his sleeve, I suppose, and intended to shoot me down with that. Now, by the Eternal, I mean to kill him!"

He looked down savagely into the eyes that met his without flinching, and as he gazed, the whole expression of his face seemed to change.

With a sudden wrench that showed strength that was herculean, he twisted the wrist of Storm until he dropped the derringer. Then his own revolver fell to the table as he bounded over it, and catching up his antagonist, hurled him to the other side of the room, where he fell with a terrific crash.

A sweep of his arm gathered up the money, which vanished into his pockets in magical haste. To repossess himself of his revolvers was only the work of a moment more.

Senator Storm had raised to a sitting posture, and though apparently half-dazed, was feeling for his hip-pocket; but no one interfered.

The frequenters of "The Office" were of the more orderly class, and even of those the attendance this evening was lighter than usual.

Before Storm could stagger to his feet, Mike Marshall had vanished.

"I wonder why he didn't kill him?" asked St. George, thoughtfully.

"Blame if I know; but anyway he's a high old sport on wheels, and you'll hear more of him through town. He takes the cake. I think I'll go over to Poison Pete's and see."

CHAPTER VIII.

CAGED IN THE LABYRINTH.

HARVEY WILDE, from all that had been seen of him, was possessed of as much nerve as the average young man—perhaps more. If there had been a chance he would have fought as savagely for his life as the most noted desperado could have done.

But when once fairly in the toils he seemed content to coolly bide his time. He watched everything with an eagle eye, and said nothing. He knew the necessity for keeping cool, both on his own account, and for that of another.

Aurora appeared to have conquered her temporary madness; and though her face was still a little pale, she accepted the situation in a way that seemed to attract the admiration of the outlaws, as well as of her fellow-prisoner.

The road-agents stood around the two as the stage dashed away. Scarcely a word was said until it had disappeared. Then the leader waved his hand.

"Take them away to the castle, and see that they neither learn too much, nor give you the slip. By all our laws the girl should die; but it

makes bad work fighting a woman. I've seen it tried. If they come down with the twenty thousand I'll keep my word. If they don't I'll string them up. Bad Ben, I will appoint you in Lieutenant Carter's place, and hold you personally responsible for the safe-keeping of the prisoners. Leave no chance for another vacancy. I want a man that I can trust against a pretty woman's face or a rich man's gold. If you're not such I'll kill you when I find it out. Off with them; and take the squad along as a guard. I have business somewhere else."

The leader of the outlaws could use the queen's English as well as the average American, as he waved his hand with rather a grand air, as he gave the order, "Off with them." It seemed to Harvey Wilde that such a man would be apt to carry out his purpose with more bitter pertinacity than the ordinary roughs of the mining camps and mountains.

For the present Wilde saw little use to attempt to parley; and he had no chance to resist. As he gave a lingering glance around him Bad Ben advanced.

He looked in every respect equal to his name. He was a short, squat Hercules, with a wicked, piggish eye glowing in the midst of a mass of unkempt hair.

He glowered at the prisoners in a villainously unfriendly way, and spoke in a thick, husky voice, that was in striking contrast with the more delicate tones of the now vanished leader.

"Yer hearn what ther boss said, eh? I ain't sayin' he's too tender-hearted, fur ef yer friends kin plank down ther dust it ar' a power ov money. But dust er no dust, ef me an' ther boys hed our way, we'd be stringin' yer both up ter ther highest tree. That's ther kind ov er wake we hav at our funerals. You h'ar me?"

His savage tones were thrown away on Wilde, who surveyed him with a cold stare.

"Oh, you may look, but that's ther truth, plum up ter ther handle. Gold can't wash away blood. Ef it hedn't been a woman, you kin bet ther'd bin slaughter right thar. Kim along now, an' rekomember ther fust sign ov foolin' down goes yer meetin'-house."

The threat was unnecessary. Without the least hesitation, the two prisoners accompanied their captors.

For some little distance, the march up the gulch on foot was quite tiresome.

After a time they came to where a number of horses were *cached*, under the guardianship of one of the band.

Then the dead man was thrown across a horse that had formerly been his; the prisoners were blindfolded; Wilde was securely bound upon the back of another animal, while Aurora was taken up in front of the lightest man in the party.

The bandages and the bonds were but loosely drawn, though it was not likely that either of the prisoners would attempt to take advantage of that fact. They had been too fully impressed with the fact that at the least effort to escape they would be shot down without mercy.

Harvey Wilde might have been willing to run the risk if he had had no one to consider but himself. It was for Aurora that his fears and sympathies were aroused. The ride that followed, hard though it was, seemed doubly tiresome on her account.

The path was rough and dangerous, winding its serpentine way along and among rock-strewn canyons and precipitous bluffs, whose dangers were more than guessed at from the very caution that these reckless rovers used in traversing them.

After what seemed a terribly long journey, there was a sudden halt of the whole body, though its members moved on again one by one and at regular intervals.

"Your turn next, Mr. Gimerank!" growled Bad Ben in a hoarse undertone. "An' mind yer don't move an inch. Yer boss knows ther road well enough, but ef yer gi'n him ther least bit on a shake thar'll be a dead man in yer boots—leastwise ef a fall ov a thousand feet kin kill. Go 'long, itty!"

At the order the mare moved straight forward, and a moment later, from the difference in the sound of her falling footsteps, Wilde knew that she had left the rocky, mountain roadway, and was treading upon timber of some kind.

Then he was conscious of a strange, swimming sensation in his head. The words of Bad Ben had prepared him, and he did not doubt but that he was suspended over an enormous depth by some frail bridge.

For the first time he made an effort to disarrange the bandage over his eyes sufficiently to see what was around and beneath him.

His wrists were tied, but he found he could use one elbow a little. Cautiously he pushed up the bandage, and peered from underneath it.

It was bright moonlight now, yet immediately about him he could see *nothing*.

To all appearances he was swinging in the air, over a chasm, whose black depths lay on either side and beneath him.

Straight ahead there was a darker, narrow

line; and beyond that the group of outlaws who had preceded him.

His horse, perfectly unguided, was slowly crossing a narrow canyon, a thousand feet perhaps, in depth, on a bridge made from the trunk of a single tree!

Even though the upper side might be faced to a flat surface he would, in cool blood, have felt little like venturing to cross it on foot, and in broad daylight; yet every one of the road-agents had ridden across, and he was compelled to do the same, without even the desperate hope of being able to save himself, should the horse make a misstep and fall. His blood ran cold; he closed his eyes, and had the suspense lasted much longer, it is likely he would have fainted.

Again they struck the solid rock, and one of the agents caught the bridle of the animal, and led her away.

At the risk of being discovered, Wilde could not help giving one backward glance at the place where he had just passed such horrible danger.

In that hasty glimpse he saw it all, and more too. In the distance beyond, he saw a single, dark form. It might be that of a mountain wolf, or other wild animal; but it might be that of a watcher who was trailing this villainous league to its secret hiding-place. It was a very slender thread on which to hang a hope; yet, after that, hope he did.

As he had begun to suspect, the hiding-place, or "castle," was not far beyond. Shortly thereafter, the gang came to a halt within what seemed to be a natural court-yard, entered by means of a hallway through a great, overhanging mass of rock.

Wilde managed to settle the bandage down again over his eyes. It was better to be on the safe side.

Bad Ben came to him, opened the knots of the thongs that bound him, and removed the bandage altogether.

"Hyar we ar' at home. Yer kin see it ain't jest so smooth er place ter git out of. Thar will be a man with a gun right thar, an' another 'un over yander. When you try any gum games they'll shute, an' don't yer furgit it. Ef yer got out an' didn't break yer neck, ez yer would be sure ter do, you'd starve ter death. Not ez we're goin' ter trust yer; but yer may ez well know ther truth. You're goin' ter be with ten thousand to us, an' ther other 'un ten thousand, so we'll take ez good keer on yer ez we know how."

He was making no idle boast. Aurora had already been placed on the ground. When Wilde had crawled down, his chafed and stiffened limbs almost refusing to sustain him, the two were marched at the muzzles of a brace of pistols past the second guard, in through a narrow opening to what Captain Iron-Arm called the dungeons.

"Thar's two rooms hyar, an' yer kin take yer choice, an' this hyar light will last long enough ter go ter bed by," remarked Bad Ben as he stuck his torch into a crevice in the wall.

"I'll bet ye'r sleepy, an' won't need much rockin'. Ter-morrer we'll look 'round an see ef we can't make yer more comfortable. We kin take keer ov travelers' way up ter ther nines—specially when they're wuth rocks—good-night."

He turned and went away.

Wilde called after him when he turned, but he gave no answer.

There were two little cells, let into the solid rock, one of them on either side of the hallway, that had undoubtedly been constructed in the same way. The torch illuminated the one and cast a dim light into the other.

"He tells the truth," said Wilde, recklessly. "I, for one, shall say nothing more at present; the torch seems to illuminate that cell the better of the two. You take that one and I will occupy this."

He spoke to Aurora, who was standing, with compressed lips, gazing around her.

"I wonder do they mean to starve us?" was her answer. "I have a horrible fear that if we expect to get out of this alive we will have to depend upon our own exertions. We must husband our strength and be ready for any stress or strain."

"Surely, you do not think that your father would forget us? He knows that any advances he may procure for me will be repaid. If I was at Walnut Bar I think I would have no trouble in arranging for it myself. There is certainly money there—or if not it can be procured within the time given."

"Yes; but you do not know father as well as I. Reckless and wild in his expectations, he has come down here thinking to make a fortune, though not ready for immediate investment. With twenty thousand dollars in his pocket—which I have no doubt he would procure almost instantly, and at any sacrifice—if he saw an opportunity for speculation he would invest on the hope of being able to turn the money over at least once in the interim. I know what dangerous chances he has been willing to take in his speculations. A madness seizes him, just as it sometimes does me."

"You do not think he would risk his daughter's life?" exclaimed Wilde indignantly.

"Heaven only knows! Lest he should, I say again we must depend first upon ourselves."

"You are the bravest woman I ever knew. If it will do you any good to know, I may say that I am worth a quarter of a million, and I would lose it all sooner than you should come to harm. Promise what you will for me and I will make your words good for you."

"They say a woman has wit. I do not see my way yet, of course; but it will come to you or to me. Wait and see. After all I do not care to eat—I will think. Good-night."

They went to their separate cells and probably slept the sleep of the righteous.

The following day they had an opportunity to face squarely the questions of their captivity. Evidently the outlaws did not intend to starve them, and the two managed to relish the viands set before them.

Nor were they treated with any particular harshness, though constantly watched. Bad Ben retained his scowling demeanor, as though it was necessary to preserve his authority; but the rest either left them alone altogether, or proved by no means unpleasant fellows to deal with.

At night they were driven from the court into their cells; and as they separated Aurora whispered:

"Be ready for whatever may happen to-night. I think I have found the way. Utter no exclamation if you have visitors, or are awakened from your sleep. At present I will say no more."

CHAPTER IX.

A FELON SHOT, AND A MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE.

No one attempted to interfere with Magic Mike as he made his exit from the office.

Except to General St. George the senator was a complete stranger—or seemed to be to every one in the room; and the worthy proprietor only claimed acquaintance during the last hour or so, having been called over to Goodman's to meet him.

The senator had been playing an irregular game, and according to the conditions laid down beforehand, as far as one could see, he had lost. If Mike Marshall had blown his brains out there might have been some inquiry, but eventually he would probably have been justified; especially since the senator had so evidently tried to play an "advantage" in the game, by the introduction of his derringer.

Chess Barker was the first one to speak to the thoroughly beaten man. He reconsidered his intentions, and glided across the room in time to put his hand on his shoulder as Storm rose up; speaking in a low, easy tone:

"Hold on a little, pard. Go slow. Don't say I didn't give you as broad a hint as the money would allow. I didn't know him myself; but I've heard of him often enough. Magic Mike always wins; he isn't dead; and this is the sure enough article. You missed being rubbed out by the skin of your teeth, and if you know what's good for you, you'll let him alone. This ain't your night on."

The face of Simon Storm that had really been ghastly for a few moments, slowly recovered its natural appearance. He looked sharply at the speaker.

"I'll have his heart's blood for this; but I don't know but what you're right. Why do you interfere?"

"I reckon you and I have played a hand or two together in the past, and I didn't want to see an old-time pard roped fur more than I thought he could carry. If you want to paddle your own canoe alone—all right. I'll never tell."

"I'll go back to Goodman's. I was a fool to leave it with so much money in my pocket. Tomorrow I may see you again."

Storm pushed past Barker, and without even a nod to St. George vanished through the door.

"He's a bad old man from Bitter Creek," laughed Chess Barker, "but he has nerve for a dozen. I wouldn't wonder if he would pick his flint and try him again."

"He had better fool 'round a cyclone," muttered St. George. "If he will do it I'm happy to say I sha'n't make it any of my funeral. I'm going to close now, and I half wish I hadn't opened at all. I'd have been five thousand to the good."

The general easily got rid of his few loungers, who had been talking over what they had seen, and were willing to go on a voyage around the camp in the hopes of being able to see more.

St. George and Chess Barker walked away together.

"Look here, Barker," said the former; "you know something about both of these men; can't you tell what you know? I've had dealings with Storm—Johnny Goodman backs him up, and Goodman is a good enough man; but I'd hate to have to fall back on him."

"General, I ain't the kind of a man to go 'round peddling news. I tell you, I think you'll come out all right; and that's as much as I care to say to anybody. Magic Mike speaks for himself. I told the boys what I knew about him, and he didn't contradict it; but believe me or not, I never saw him before."

"Can you tell me whether those two men

ever saw each other? That is what agitates *my* mind. Do you know, I thought once that they might be in cahoot, and the whole thing a made-up game?"

Barker gave utterance to a hearty laugh, about the genuineness of which there could be no doubt.

"Don't you worry about that. When those two meet again, there'll be blood on the floor; see if there ain't."

"Maybe, but I wish I knew. Here we are at Pete's. We can see if there is any news of the missing girl. Things seem to have simmered down a good bit."

They entered, but did not stay long. Information was scarce, and the men there had got down to their old amusements. As the crowd was not the kind with which Barker and the general cared to mix, the two departed as soon as they found that nothing further was known of Alta, Lame Luke, or Mike Marshall. There had been no further collision, or some one would have heard of it. Magic Mike had suddenly disappeared.

After a little the two strolled toward the shanty occupied by Barker.

During his flush periods the gambler boarded at the hotel; when funds were not so plenty he "bached it" by himself.

The hut was some little distance from The Office. St. George, who had lit a cigar, was puffing away quite contentedly at it and listening to Barker, who could, when he felt like it, talk like a house on fire.

Then, suddenly, in their very faces, there was a flare and a crash, coming from the roadside, but a few feet away.

At the sound General St. George sprung hastily back, with the ready revolver in his hand; but Chess Barker pitched heavily to the ground, without even a groan.

The first thought of St. George was vengeance. He dashed into the mesquites that lay to the left of the road; but not a soul could he find, and after he had time for a moment's thought he hastened back, to see what had happened to his companion.

If the shot had been at Barker, the man who fired it was no novice. The mark was made by a large bullet, probably forty-four caliber, that had struck fairly in the center of the forehead. From the wound the blood was oozing out, and the single glance he gave, convinced St. George that the guilty gambler was stone dead.

The shot had not attracted any attention. No one was near, and as the distance from the spot to Barker's shanty was not great, St. George gave no alarm, but picking up the motionless body, carried it straight to the cabin.

The door was locked, but it was not difficult, if somewhat repugnant, to find the key; and the general laid the body carefully in the bunk. Then locking the door behind him, he went in search of Dan the Drover, and one or two other friends of the man who had been so foully dealt with.

His first move was to Johnny Goodman's. Dan the Drover was not there, but St. George explained the motive of his visit to the landlord, adding:

"I want to keep it dark for a little, except among a few good men. If it got out the whole town would be running over the trail, and they couldn't do better than if they were looking for a needle in a haystack. If we can keep it clear Dan—if he's as good as I've heard he was—can run the whelp right down."

"That's so," said Goodman, "and if we catch him we'll string him up, you bet. Ther' ain't one of the boys that wouldn't chip in for poor Chess. There never was a better-hearted man at the Bar. He wasn't strong enough to do much work, but he had grit clear up to the limit; and played as square a game as any man ever did that flipped pasteboards for a living. You didn't see anybody, and haven't any suspicion?"

"Nary person did I see. And I haven't an idea who would want to turn his toes up. He's been having such a bad run lately that there's nobody can have a call on him. By the way, did you hear about the big game at The Office, after I left here?"

"Didn't I? Some of the boys came in and spread the news."

"Has Storm come back yet? I thought I'd speak to him if he had."

"Nary come."

"You sure? S'pose you try his room. If he's there tell him I've got about five thousand to spare, yet, if he can't get out of the pinch any other way; though it will run me close. I can tack it on to the rest; and the security will carry it if things are as they look."

"Oh, you'll find him square enough; though he does get one of these condemned spells now and then. I've heard he plays a mighty strong hand, generally; though this Mike Marshall seems to be able for him. I'll try his room of course; though I b'lieve it's no good."

Goodman went away; and came back after a little much astonished.

"The old coon was there sure enough. Guess he's ashamed of himself and slipped in the back way. He says he'll see you in the morning."

"All right. I'll go on up the gulch if I don't

find the boys at Pete's. Keep dark except to the friends. In the morning we'll scoop in a candidate for a hanging match, or know the reason why."

After this, luck was with St. George. Hardly had he left Goodman's door when he stumbled against some of the very men he was looking for, and he broke the news without hesitation.

"Thunder an' lightnin'!" exclaimed Drover Dan.

"Yer don't say so! Pore Chess! He warn't our style o' man, nohow; but he war ther soldest sand-pile I ever stumbled over, an' true-blue, chuck-up. You bet it war some 'un ez know'd it warn't safe ter give him a chance fur his white alley."

"An' yer couldn't find no sign ov ther galoot? Dog-gone him, ef I git 'nigh him I don't guess I'll wait fur no rope. It'll be rapid death. But some 'un must sit 'round an' keep ther rats off. Let's go up an' lay him out square. Then mebbe I kin git on ther trail by moonlight. You're a stranger, sorter, an' ain't 'xpected ter do fancy work; but ef I'd bin thar I'd 'a' hed him afore this."

The little knot of half a dozen men turned and went hastily toward Barker's cabin, meeting no one on the road.

The door was locked, just as St. George had left it. Applying the key to the lock the door flew open and all entered, St. George striking a match and holding it over the bunk where he had laid the corpse.

Then they stared at each other in doubt what to think.

On the pillow there was a little pool of blood, but otherwise the bunk was empty.

The corpse had vanished.

CHAPTER X.

TOMBSTONE TOM "SHAKES 'EM OUT," AND HOLDS THE DROP.

As it was Sunday, and there was plenty of time for it, on the following morning there was more excitement than usual about Walnut Bar.

The men that had started in pursuit of the supposed abductors of the bear queen had returned without having obtained any information, or sight of the chase.

That is, the men of Walnut Bar.

Lame Luke had not put in his appearance, nor was he expected to return until he learned something definite of the fate of the young girl who was traveling under his protection.

The mystery concerning Chess Barker caused a great deal of excitement. The particulars of the affair had leaked out; and it was fully as much a matter of interest what had become of the body as who was the unknown assassin.

The slaughter of half a dozen of the rougher of the toughs in a row among themselves would not have been of half the moment of this almost unseen, and altogether remarkable affair. It would have been a bad day for a man upon whom suspicion might happen to fall.

Among the most interested of those who troubled themselves about the matter was a man who, twenty-four hours before, had been an utter stranger to the Bar.

It was just as well for him that he was in at Poison Pete's when Barker and the general left there the night before, and that he did not move from his seat for half an hour after. He was evidently a suspicious character, and was no other than Tombstone Tom, who had come strolling into the camp as unconcerned as though he owned the city, but keeping very quiet about his late adventure with Magic Mike and the road-agents.

Bummer though he appeared, he was not refused admittance at Poison Pete's. The worthy proprietor had too many hard-looking customers to object to one more until his financial standing had been put to the test.

Burke was not dead-broke, though the few small coin that he showed were brought up from the hidden recesses of his rags with evident reluctance.

No fool was he, however, as some of the boys discovered. Before he crawled off to his rough shake-down in the lean-to adjoining the Best Chance, he had doubled his ostensible capital more than once.

When he came out the next morning he had tried to give his dilapidation a few signs of returning prosperity, though he looked bad enough yet.

One of the first things he heard was an account of the mystery.

It did not interfere with the mastication of his breakfast, then in progress; but between bites his eyes twinkled up at his informant, who happened to be Pete himself, and he nodded his head with more satisfaction than horror.

"Funny sorter thing. Who you s'pose took ther corpus? Ef he hed his brains blown out he wouldn't sca'ssly go promernadin' 'round shoutin' fur some 'un ter hand him a wooden overcoat. He must 'a' bin stole."

"That's so, too; but what in thunder did they want with him? That's what I'd like ter know."

"That ain't no hard conunjerum. It wa'n't him they wanted; it war ther bullet. See? Ef I hed ther stiff an' were runnin' ther case, first thing I'd do would be ter hook out ther slug."

Bet yer rocks it war an odd caliber er marked lead, er somethin' 'bout it ter trace it right home ter ther galoot ez fired ther shot. That's ther jooce in ther cokernut. Sabbe?"

This was an idea that somehow had not yet been started, and the old fellow received due credit for his ingenuity by half a dozen interested listeners, who offered to escort him to the scene of the tragedy, to see if he could make any more out of it when he was on the ground.

Modesty would never be the death of Tom Burke. He started out in the center of the procession and soon was on the spot.

As Barker had said, the immediate neighborhood was pretty well tramped over by the promiscuous crowd that went to see the little smutch of blood upon the ground.

Dan the Drover had a clear start, however, and though it was not generally known he was well off on a trail that he believed was left by the assassin.

As yet no one knew what had become of the body, though others were searching for it.

On being taken to the spot Tombstone Tom gazed around with a complacent air, tucked his thumbs into the holes of his ragged vest, and inflated his cheeks until they seemed to bulge over and close his eyes. Then he let go of his breath, making a sound something less than the exhaust of a steam engine.

"I kin too late. I war afeared on it. Half the city hez bin byar frolickin' round; but it ain't hard ter giv yer ther giner'l lay out. 'Bout hyar's whar ther durned p'izen cuss stood an' tuk aim. He gi'n 'bout three lively skips an' war down in yander gulch, then he paddled 'long till he struck ther trail fur Glory Gulch an' cut his lucky a hossback. Mebbe he went through; an' mebbe he tuk to the mount'ings. Aryhow, I'll bet rocks ez ther man ez war in this hyar warn't from ther Bar."

"I'll bet ye'r right, too," said Lion Bob, one of his newly-found admirers.

"In course yer be."

"That's solid."

These were some of the echoes which Barker heard with the coolest complacency.

"I sb'd really smile ef I warn't. Why, I'm er trailer by trade, an' a boss on wheels. When I git down ter work ther ain't no two-legged mule in Arizon'y ez kin lay over me. I'm ther boss—yes. Ef yer want me ter try it on a bit I'll show yer what an' old boss like Tombstone Tom kin do."

"That's ther way ter talk it. Go in."

It seemed as though the man really had a genius for the business—or else he was a consummate fraud.

He kept the little gang well behind him, and followed the gulch he had pointed out without the least hesitation for some distance, his nose in the air like a hound on the scent.

Then suddenly he turned to the right and clambered out to the higher ground.

On the bank he looked first back toward Walnut Bar; then in the direction of the trails to the northwest.

"Hyar yer are," his voice thick with gratified pride. "Didn't I tolle yer so? Hyar's whar he bed a hoss in bidin'—an' thar's his trail. We kin foller it a bit; but ef yer hopes ter ketch him afoot yer does more ner Tombstone Tom does; an' w'ot he don't know about sich biz ain't worth knowin'. Thar's only one chanet. This yere Dan the Drover, ez ye'r tellin' on, may hev got in his work in time. He hed an airy start."

It was foolishness to try to continue the pursuit on foot; and the delegation from Poison Pete's were not very anxious anyhow.

"I've did ernuf fur glory an' I'm dry er whale ashore. Ef some one hez set 'em up at ther P'ison's I'll go 'long back. Ef not I'm out on ther perpect, an' I mou't ez well go 'long an' see what I kin nose out in ther line ov pay gravel er quartz. I'm hyar fur biz an' I've kin ter stay. An' I don't want a hull city hangin' 'round ter locate on my strike. It is good-mornin', er not! Pleasure afore biz anyhow. I don't keer ter settle right down slap at ther go-off."

Burke stopped, drew a step or two aside, and stood looking at the rest with an air of assumed dignity. He evidently felt his importance, and intended to make the most of it.

Lion Bob spoke up for the crowd.

"Kim right erlong back, old man. Ther' ain't nothin' mean erbout us boys at ther bar. When we kin ercross a stranger we like, we jist kerry him on our hands. We'll treat yer right, er I shu'd snicker."

The result was that Tom Burke started back for the Best Chance, with a popularity that was pretty sure to grow with a certain class, and he enlivened the way with most marvelous stories of his experience as a trailer and gold-hunter. By the time they reached Poison Pete's, he had made friends who were ready and anxious to "set 'em up" if only to hear him talk. For an hour or so things were very lively, and Burke appeared to be reaching the point of saturation.

Then he slipped out, during an excited discussion between two of his quondam friends as to which should have the privilege of paying for another round.

There appeared to be something the matter with Mr. Burke's legs. He slapped first the one and then the other, and made several starts and stops before he was able to navigate across the distance that separated Poison Pete's from John Goodman's hotel.

After a time he arrived there in safety. His face had all along borne the look of gravity which a drunken man assumes when he finds that, in all likelihood, his gin has got away with him.

He looked up at the sign—for Goodman had a sign, of course—and after a momentary hesitation, went in.

Goodman marked him, and came for him.

"See hiver, my friend, we don't want your sort 'round hyer. Jest you prance right straight out."

Tombstone Tom drew himself up so straight he nearly tumbled over backward, and laying a moderately dirty forefinger on the side of his fiery nose he winked, with a smile that made him look like a sick monkey on a cold day.

"Tba's or right, broth'r Good'n. Lemme speak with yer jest er leasty bit. Yer got mansh hyer name'r Shtorm, eh?"

"What business is it of yours whether I have or not? You jest git outen this afore thar's trouble in ther air."

"I tell yer I'm Tombstone Tom, the boss trailer ov ther Heelyer rivery, an' I'm ther mansh er wants ter see. Tell him I'm 'round—me, m'self, indervideoally. Y'ear me? Eh?"

Goodman had his fingers already twisted in Tombstone Tom's coat-collar, and his foot was drawn back. He was not a large man, but it is surprising what an amount of weight there is about a landlord when he is on the bounce.

"Shtorm's gal, yer know," said the man from Tombstone, with all the drunken gravity it was possible to assume; and without a sign of knowledge that his presence was disagreeable. "I'se boss trailer, an' war ter see him 'bout gittin' ther gal. Losh ther dingbatsh, an' goin' try er new deal. Sent fur me. Whersh he at?"

Goodman paused.

"You blasted old rum-soak! Do you mean he wants to see you?"

"That'sh wha's ther masher."

"I'll see, then; but if you're lying I'll put yer soak under a quartz-crusher. You stay there."

Johnny slammed the man down into a seat, and went off to see the senator, who had been under the weather all morning. Somewhat to his surprise Storm requested Goodman to show the man in.

"I've been a double-barreled idiot; and I know it. I'm all abroad, half-crazy, don't know which way to turn, and am open to advice from any quarter. The shrewdest men west of the mountains are sometimes just these old dead-beats who live by their wits. They hate hard work like poison; and they find ways of getting over the mountain without a climb. Yes, I'll bear what he has to say."

Goodman marched in the bummer pretty much after the manner of presenting a prisoner in a police court.

"Thar he is. If you think ye'r' able for him, I'll leave you alone; but if he gits up any racket, shout. I'll bounce him afore you sing twice."

Goodman's somewhat patronizing tone was lost on the senator. Because he was a man of some wealth, and not altogether of the average Arizonian class was no reason why he should not be able to take care of himself.

He waved Goodman impatiently away, and the landlord retreated at once.

"Now, then, let me hear what you want. I can assure you I have no time nor disposition to listen to nonsense. Goodman said you desired to speak to me in regard to my daughter."

Since the departure of the landlord quite a change had taken place in the appearance of Tombstone Tom. The look of intoxication had vanished, and he was his hard, wicked, scheming old self again.

He put one finger on his lip and winked shrewdly, at the same time cocking up his ear to listen to Goodman's retreating steps.

Then he leaned over, shading his mouth with his hand, as if afraid that his whisper might be carried to other ears, as in an undertone he ejaculated:

"I'm er committee. Yer wouldn't s'pect it, an' they don't mean that nobody shu'd; but I'm er committee."

"What internal nonsense is this? Committee for what? If you try any such blasted games on me I'll throw you out of the window. Git!"

"Eggsakly. I know'd it; but it's all right. I'm solid. They've got an eye on yer, an' they mean ter hole yer plum ter ther line. Ef yer ever heard on Capt'n Iron-Arm, yer knows who I be."

The senator was too surprised to be angry.

"You Captain Iron-Arm?"

"Hole on, hole on! I ain't that individ. I'm on'y his committee. Yer see yer ter bring ter ther royal treasury twenty thousand. I'm ther man ez are byar ter see that it's did, an' ter take in ther spon's at ther app'nted time."

"But this is too monstrous for belief. Would

any reasonable man believe that an outlaw would put his neck in danger? Why, if I said the word this minute they would hang you up high as Haman."

"No they wouldn't."

"Why not? Don't you understand the feeling toward this band of road-agents that has done so much damage in the past and is a standing menace for the future?"

"They wouldn't b'leve it. That's why. Does I look like a bold outlaw? I's a gallus-looking road-agent, ain't I? That's why they sent me. Oh, Iron-Arm ain't no man's fool, now, an' don't yer surgit it!"

The only answer of Senator Storm was a half-suppressed malediction, and without waiting for anything further, the bummer went on:

"Yer see they heerd yer hed bin speilin' off ther money ez yer raised accordin' ter promise, an' they wants ter know ef thar's more whar that come frum; 'cos, ef ther ain't, ther jig's 'bout up fur ther gal an' ther young man ez ar' in ther boat with her. Can't 'ford ter board 'em both fur a couple weeks fur nothin', an' take all ther risks. Better string 'em up now an' call it squar' on ther one she dropped."

"Now see here," said the senator, more coolly than ever. "This thing won't do. You don't belong to that gang, and you and I know it. I don't want any more nonsense. Get out of this. If you dare to bother me again I'll see that you are strung up by the neck within five minutes thereafter. You understand? Git!"

"I reckon yer b'lieves all that, but yer won't do nothin' ov ther kind, an' I'll tell yer why."

The two faced each other squarely, Storm with rising passion in his face, and Tom Burke full of conscious power.

"Why not? Speak, before I strangle you where you stand."

"Fa'stly, 'cos yer ain't quite old enuf, an' ugly enuf, an' smart enuf ter spell a-b-e-l, able. An' secondly, 'cos me an' my pards know who it wer' ez fired ther shot ez took Chess Barker outen ther wet—an' you woz ther man!"

Senator Storm did not deny, and was not overwhelmed; but his hands went around to his hips like lightning. If the belt that he doubtless was instinctively feeling for had been there, Tombstone Tom's lease on life would have had its uncertainties, with the probabilities of a sudden ending.

As it was, there was the loss of a second or two, and in that time Burke was acting.

"I doot ginn'r'ly draw'r; but in er pineh I kin shake 'em out. Ye'r' jist a trifle slow in ther motions, an' I've got yer kivered. I don't mean yer no harm ef ye'r' reasonable, but don't yer try no gouge game er I'll be thar ahead ov yer."

Tombstone Tom in some mysterious way had "shook 'em out," and held the drop.

There was now a chance to talk reason.

CHAPTER XI.

MISS LAVINIA ASKS QUESTIONS.

"Ef yer think yer able ter git away with this byar boss, stick in the spurs; but I'll throw yer cold. What yer better do are ter talk sense an' see what's ther lay-out. I only wants ter convince yer that I'm ther agent ov ther baddest men ever hatched, an' they haz yer foul."

Storm, who looked as much puzzled as he was angry, hesitated, then quietly returned his pistol, that he had only half drawn, to its place.

"My friend, you are certainly the champion black-mailer of the universe; and on your own confession, one who would be strung up without mercy, if the truth about you was known—at least as you tell it to me. But you are not one of Captain Iron-Arm's gang, and I decline to treat with you, altogether."

"I ain't eh? Why not?"

"Because I was to recognize their messenger by a certain password, which you have failed to give."

"Lather and shave! You didn't ask for no password. Ef you go back on me ther'll be ther sweetest little duck hanging up fur ter dry ther Arizony ever seen. An' ef thar ain't a thousand handed over ter me on my own private 'count, Chess Barker's friends'll be puttin' yer in a hole half an hour arter I give them ther pointer. See byar, I'd scorn ter take er snap on er man 'thout givin' him er chance ter squirm. I'll give yer jist twenty-four hours ter cogertate, an' ef thar ain't no answer I'll band in my report ter head-quarters. I'm stoppin' at Poison Pete's. Ta-ta."

The man from Tombstone waved his hand airily, and, without waiting for an answer took his departure. He was going out of the building when he saw Johnny Goodman.

He turned and approached, with a look of jaunty impudence on his face.

"You'll find your man whar yer left him, safe an' sound in wind, limb and bottom. You jist go see ef yer tbink he can't take keer ov hisse's. An' you tell him from me thet if I don't hear from him soon thar'll be music in ther air."

Then he went back to Poison Pete's, and seemed to forget his business cares in the allurements of that sink-hole of wickedness; and not

showing as much interest concerning the two missing women as the ordinary rustlans of the town.

Hardly had he left Senator Storm's room, however, when that gentleman sprung fiercely to his feet. The self-control that he had been so strongly striving to retain vanished, and he paced up and down in his contracted quarters.

"Who in the fiend's name is he? I'd swear he was nothing but the ancient dead-beat he represents, were it not for the nerve of the man and the steady way he pulls his fire-arms. Curse him, I tried to draw too late. For once I was off my guard. If I had shot him down the moment Goodman's back was turned, I would have been safe enough. Yet how could I have imagined the combination game he was going to play—or that he had any game at all? Of course, 'for Aurora's sake,' I must listen to every doddering mooner, without attempting to teach them that I know my own business best."

"I've had a dozen of them coming to suggest; but this one is on the make, and if there is anyone behind him they might say enough about Barker to breed trouble. I must find out more about him, if I have to kill him first and wring the information out of his corpse. Ab!"

He paused in his walk and looked up. The cuddy-holes that Goodman called rooms were at least arranged conveniently, Storm occupying one of the largest of them. Adjoining it, and with a connecting door, was a smaller one that had been intended for the ladies, and was now occupied by Miss Lavinia.

The door had opened and the senator's sister was standing there, a look of surprise on her plain, hard features.

"Simon Storm," she said, "what is the meaning of all this? I do not understand."

"I am not aware that it is necessary you should. I've listened to a thousand suggestions, and there is not a grain of sense in any of them. When I get Aurora and young Wilde out of their clutches the town may rise right up at the road-agents; but until then I don't want to do anything that will sacrifice them. There is only one thing that is safe, and that is to have twenty thousand dollars ready to plank down. Last night that was all right, as I thought. Now I find that it may take a few days. I believe I can raise the money here; but to make sure, I have commenced to arrange for it elsewhere. Until I get it I'll lie quiet. Rest your soul in patience. I am too old a band to make a false move now. It will all come right."

Miss Lavinia listened without interruption; but without being convinced, judging from the set look on her face.

"That may all be truth, Simon Storm; but there is something else that I want explained. These walls are as thin as paper and I could not help but hear everything that was said between you and that visitor of yours. What did he mean? Who was that Barker? How does it come that he dares make such a charge?"

"I don't know that it is any of your business," was the cool answer.

"Not my business! Not, when I have come here to these terrible wilds as a companion to your daughter, and see you, and her, and myself becoming involved deeper and deeper in the most horrible toils. I tell you, Simon Storm, I'll make it my business."

"Then you will get not only me but yourself in a heap of trouble. If I find I can't trust you I'll have to send you back alone, while I stay here to finish up the best way I can. It was for Aurora's sake that I brought you along, but I might have known that you would be of no earthly use. One woman won't stick by another, and you're no worse than the rest."

He spoke with a bitterness that seemed as though it must have truth behind it.

It had its effect on Miss Lavinia.

"It seems hard, I know; but since I left the city everything has turned upside down. It is the most natural thing in the world for a man of wealth and position to be accused of the most villainous crime—so natural that he hardly resents it; and I cannot help but fear that he is going to forget his own daughter. I know I am but a foolish woman, but I love Aurora, and if you fail to do your duty, I will do mine at whatever cost."

"I suppose! You are gaining nerve wonderfully," sneered the senator. "If you will take my advice you will remain quiet, and watch how men manage such things here. It may save money; and it certainly will save life."

Miss Lavinia was not altogether satisfied. This might be advice, it might be a threat.

Without argument or question, she turned away. She looked as though beaten; and Senator Storm had hopes that she would not trouble him further, for a time at least.

"Confound her! If she wants to do any thing, why don't she cry? That's the regular thing for the antiquated female in such an emergency. At any rate, she would not bother me again this morning if I remained here—which I do not think I will. It is time now that I was out, and moving. The people in Walnut Bar must know me. Because I am in trouble should be the very reason why I should drive business as hard as I know how. And I'll show

some of them here a thing or two yet when I get a good hold on the Gulch."

Simon Storm made his entrance into the Bar under somewhat discouraging circumstances; yet he did not give any indications of intending to drop his corner.

As he stood there, thoughtfully gazing out of the window, he looked the cool, shrewd business man all over. If he had lost his prudence the night before, he had shown abundance of grit; and if he had come to stay, he would not seem wild in prophesying for himself a future of success at Walnut Bar.

CHAPTER XII.

A WOMAN OF NERVE.

HARVEY WILDE took things more coolly from the fact that he believed that if the two were held for ransom the outlaws were really too honest to want to turn over a damaged article as of full value. He accordingly believed in present safety; but he was just as confident that when the allotted time was up, if the required amount was not on hand the world would come to an end, so far as they were concerned.

He had had perfect confidence in Senator Storm, up to the time when Aurora had enlightened him as to certain traits in regard to her father.

After that he too believed that it would be just as well to do what they could in their own behalf, while hoping for outside assistance, and that it would not be too long delayed.

When he came to think over it he recognized how little he really knew in regard to the senator. His acquaintance had been made incidentally, having been introduced to him en route, as a gentleman who was taking his daughter and sister with him to the same destination.

Since then they had traveled together.

Storm had made quite an impression on the young man, as a keen, clear-headed man, up to all the ways and wiles of the country, while retaining the average honesty of the Western business man; Miss Lavinia was an incumbrance that would have been unsupportable if she had not so readily allowed herself to be snubbed; and Miss Aurora was all that she has been presented to the reader, and more. Insensibly Wilde had submitted more and more to her domination.

Among these strange surroundings, where she nevertheless seemed to be at home, he was willing to allow her the leading part which, under any other circumstances, he would himself have assumed.

He was thinking all this over after he had thrown himself down upon his couch. He tried to cease, and to slumber; but sleep refused to visit his eyelids. After what Aurora had told him he was expectant. He wished she had either revealed nothing, or more. She must have some plan; what was it?

He remembered that during the day he had seen her once or twice speak a few low-toned words. Perhaps she had gained an ally among the outlaws. Under no other circumstances could he imagine a successful effort.

Time wore on. Perhaps he had dozed—even dreamed—for the hour was well after midnight when he suddenly awoke to the clearest consciousness. Some one whispered his name.

The sound barely floated to him in the darkness.

"Mr. Wilde! Mr. Wilde!"

In as low a tone he uttered a warning "Hush!"

Then he crept cautiously toward the entrance to the cell.

The light that had dimly illuminated the cells had gone out, and all was involved in utter darkness.

A soft hand suddenly touched his face and he knew it belonged to Aurora. He caught it in his own and gave it a firm, reassuring pressure, though he noted that it did not shrink away from the contact.

On the contrary, it held his own firmly, and he felt the fresh, warm breath of the girl on his cheek as she whispered in his ear:

"Not a word till you hear me. Listen! I had, to-day, a few dozen words with one of these men, who is not altogether hardened. He would help me if he could, for he fears that this Iron-Arm—or whoever may be the chief of these outlaws—will not deal honestly with us. How could he?"

"He will be on the outer guard to-night, and if we can reach him he will be so blind as not to note our further progress.

"I saw more of the route bitter than these demons suspect, and believe that by morning I could lead the way back to the spot where the stage was halted, though what dangers we may meet on the way, after we have crossed the bridge over the chasm, is more than I can predict.

"Our one chance is to-night. Ought we to make the effort, no matter what success may cost? We have given no pledges; they have guarded us night and day; are we not free to escape if we can? Tell me. You know better than I how we must deal with these thieves and retain our honor."

The murmur from her lips scarcely reached his ears, yet he heard every word of it; and it thrilled him to the heart to hear her questioning what might be their duty. There was but one duty. It required an effort to repress a savage laugh. His arm sought her waist and he drew her closer to him as he whispered:

"I say, take any and every chance. There is not a hand here that is not stained with blood; nor a living man we need hesitate to slay. If you have any plan tell it to me and you will find me ready to execute, whatever it may be. For myself, I would fight here to the bitter end, and die if need be. It is the thought of you that has stung my hands. Tell me. What next? If we are to act, the time is short."

He felt her little, young frame quiver in his grasp.

"It is terrible, terrible," she whispered, after a moment's silence, in which he was certain that he could hear the beating of her heart.

"If we are to succeed I must do the first cruel work. It is deadly, treacherous work, that I shrink from, though I do not fear it. After this night I will never again be light-hearted, womanly."

"And do you think that I would allow you to run the risk for me? No, my queen, my darling. Whatever might happen, whatever fate might be forced upon us, you will always be to me a gem among jewels; the brightest star of the sex. Yet I would not be half a man, would not be worthy of your love, of that love which I one day hope to win and wear, if I did not save you, so far as living soul can save you from all that you fear. Tell me what it is that you dread?"

He spoke faster than he had yet dreamed of doing. In the midst of their danger he was wooing; yet he believed he was as cool as ever he had been in his life. He even waited to hear what answer she might give, though he did not believe that he had angered her.

"You are mistaken," she answered, her whisper, if anything, assuming a gentler tone.

"It was I that brought you into this danger; it is no more than right that I should do my full share when a chance for rescue shows itself."

He placed his hand lightly on her lips, to check her self-condemning utterances; but she as lightly brushed it away.

"My friend, if I may call him such, warned me. Nothing that you can do will stand a chance of success. With me it is different. When he is alone the sentinel on duty here must be removed. I only can do it—for he will not suspect me until it is too late."

"Monstrous! How will you do the work?"

She shrank away; was silent a moment; then Wilde felt the cool blade of a knife touch his cheek.

"That is the only means. Pray for me, for I must use it."

He caught at her wrist, but it eluded him; and while he sought her hand in the darkness her form slipped from his grasp.

"Wait for me here. If I fail know nothing of my intentions. If I succeed there is freedom, perhaps, for both of us."

"Aurora!" he whispered, the sound rising higher than was prudent; but she gave him back no answer. He could not even hear the fall of her feet as she flew along the stone-floored hall.

He was no coward, but he shivered at the work this girl had set out to do, and would have given his life, just then, to stop her.

That she would follow the matter up to the bitter end he very well knew, for he had not seen her once already in her magnificent rage of defense. Terrible thing it was that fate should drive her on such a deadly path.

Of course he could not wait for her. It might be that he could help her yet. He started up and groped his way after her in the darkness. The distance was but a trifle, and beyond the open court was illuminated by the moonlight.

As he neared the opening he heard a sound between a gasp and a gurgle, followed by the noise of a fall.

Then everything again was still.

The task was done, and he saw a dim shadow stealing toward him.

"Aurora!" he whispered.

She held up her hand with a gesture for silence.

"No. Do not touch me," she said. "It is done. Let that be enough. Come! You must be in your stocking-feet until we are safely away. Are you ready? If so, follow me."

CHAPTER XIII.

CAPTAIN IRON-ARM PLAYS TRUMPS.

THE plan for escape did not seem so unreasonable, providing the first guard, or sentinel, could be removed, and the second one was true to his bargain.

With the first part executed a weird thrill of hope shot through Wilde's breast. He was ready for anything now, and together the pair stole away.

After all the young man saw the benefit of allowing Aurora to lead. In a few moments he would have been confused, but she seemed to

remember every inch of the ground, and went forward with as much confidence as though it was broad daylight. By the time his intense excitement was a little allayed he found himself out in the moonlight beyond, and facing the sentinel, who was certainly prepared for their coming.

His weapons were in his hands, and he did not mean to be taken by surprise, but at the same time he showed no hostile intentions.

"Ye'r thar, ar' ye, lady-bird? Good enough fur you. I warn't mistook'n 'bout ther sand yer kerry. Ef ye'r wise yer won't linger long round byar, but make ther tallest kind er tracks down ther gulch. I've did all I kin fur yer, an' I dunno how it'll end, but I does know yer won't throw off on me ef ye'r tooken a g'in."

"You can be sure of that, my man," interposed Wilde. "But cannot you finish your good work? Go with us and guide us to the Bar? I have not a dime now—your friends took good care of that—but I will guarantee that you receive a thousand dollars, and I will pay your way to any point you may name. Here it is only a question of time. Why not abandon this mode of life and avoid the rope or the bullet that is bound one day to come?"

The man gave a low, savage laugh.

"I ain't doin' this fur stamps, though ther leetle lady-bird beez g'in me a sparkler that would melt fur big money ef I cu'd git ter whar ther war a market. I'm doin' it fur her purty picters. I never see'd no men tryin' ter stamp on kaliker ez I didn't chip right in on her side ov the lay-out. Ef yer hed the thousand hyar now in course I'd scoop 'em in et I thort it war safe; but it wouldn't be twice er thousand ez I'd look at ef I hed ter go ter Wa'nut Bar ter git 'em. Ef yer git ther safe, an' wants ter know why, jist ax 'em ef they ever hearn on Rocky Sam. They'd hang me ther fust five minits."

"But you need not enter the camp if you do not choose. Go somewhere else."

"Go whar I would, Iron-Arm 'ud reach me, ef he got it down that fine on yours truly. I ain't ready ter change in yit ef I kin git 'round it, but ef I do ever git outen this I'll send yer word' an' you kin let me hev ther thousand anyhow. I've airned it sure. Now git."

He pointed along the trail, and, drawing up his revolvers, leveled them full at the young man.

Evidently he meant to have no more parleying.

"You shall have it," said Wilde, harshly.

He would have bid higher by a dozen times, but he saw that it would be useless. There was no spot that would receive Rocky Sam; and if his comrades or he were certain of his treachery there was no place where they would not follow to strike him down.

Back into the shadows skulked the pair; and on, down the narrow trail, which seemed to hang, for some distance, against the side of a perpendicular cliff.

"If we meet the outlaw captain now we are lost. If I had but a weapon! There is only the chance of flight while we are undiscovered. Heaven grant that they do not find out our absence for a time."

"We have perhaps three hours—surely not more. When they find him they will know what has happened. If I had thought I might have taken his revolvers; but I was wild to get away. I feel as though I could not have touched him for the world. He will haunt me forever. Oh, it was most horrible!"

Harvey Wilde knew what she meant, and did not blame her, though she had even left behind the knife with which she had done the deed.

What other woman could have done even as much?

The pathway grew broader at last. They had come to the spot where the cliff faced the opposite wall of the canyon, that was spanned by the dangerous bridge, made from the trunk of a single huge tree.

Beyond, on the near side of the canyon the roadway seemed to end in a jagged wall that, sloping for some little distance, then went precipitously up. It looked hopeless to essay that. The only course to follow was across the pine trunk, and down the intricate path by which they had been brought.

In haste though they were they lingered an instant in the shadow, looking longingly at the opposite side.

All was silent. In sight there was only the moonlighted rocks, and the dark thread across the chasm. Without further hesitation they sprang forward, Wilde leading.

At another time he might have hesitated—he would at least have gone carefully and slowly. Now he dashed across at full speed.

And then as he reached the opposite side, the dark form of a man rose up.

He had been crouching behind the immense butt of the tree, probably watching for some time; and then were two sharp clicks, as he thrust out a pistol in either hand.

"Come now, my friend, don't throw away your life. Your corpse wouldn't be worth a single cent to us, in a square deal, but if you don't hold up your hands I'll have to throw you cold. You bear me?"

Wilde leaped back a pace or two.

"It is Captain Iron-Arm!" he shouted to Aurora, "save yourself if you can."

The backward spring was but a feint. Halt-ing, with his hands well above his head, Wilde suddenly sprung at the outlaw, while Aurora, turning, bounded back, and then up the rocks, which, but a moment before, had seemed so effectually to bar their progress.

No other course was then open; for, as Wilde closed in, several more of the road-agents made their appearance, and the young man was beaten to the ground by a single blow.

"The girl is safe enough," exclaimed the leader. "She's up among the rocks; but a goat couldn't go any further. There's been some bad work here, and whatever it is we'll take its value out of him. I'll see the two don't get where they can see each other again. She's as desperate as a wild-cat, and would put nerve in a white-pine stump. There, I don't think he can get around that."

While speaking, Iron-Arm had drawn the wrists of the young man behind his back and knotted them tightly together.

"Two of you watch him a moment! Shorty, you run on up and see what is to pay at the den. The rest of us will have to try and cage that tiger-cat, without letting her do any damage to herself or to any one else. Ha! Halt there!"

His voice grew sterner and sharper, and he threw his hand up, covering with his ready revolver the form of a man upon the opposite side of the canyon who came running down the trail.

"Ha! it are!" came back the answer. "Hey, you got 'em! The old boy are ter pay, an' no pitch hot!"

"Yes, we have them; but there has been some cursed carelessness. If we hadn't struck the spot just when we did, your infernal necks would have stretched hemp one way or the other, sure enough. What is the meaning of this?"

The man was Rocky Sam.

"I tell yer, the gal put er knife inter Owl-eye, an' ther two slipped by me in ther shadder while I was on ther upper eend ov my beat. I kinder smelt suthin' wrong, an' went in ter see. Toar I found Owl-eye. He wa'n't hurt ez bad ez he war skeered, an' I reckon he'll be all right ag'in soon. So he managed ter tell me what war ther go, an' I galloped right down biar after givin' ther alarm—an' that's ther rest ov ther boys comin' now."

The road-agent leader turned on Wilde, making a movement as though he intended to use the revolver that lay in his hand.

"You will have it, curse you!" he snarled. "Hard as we try to avoid it, there has to be blood shed. You are bad medicine for us, and the best thing I can do is to slaughter you right here and now."

Harvey Wilde never flinched, nor did he even attempt to raise his bound hands. He looked the man full in the eyes, a cold smile for the moment curving his thin, straight lips.

"Did you suppose I would be mad enough not to take a chance when I saw it? I gave you no parole, and have broken no pledge. Shoot if you choose. It will anticipate the end but a few days. I never expect to leave your hands alive."

"You are game enough—it would be a pity to take you in out of the damp, and leave your half million go to the shivery coward that would get it. No, I think we'll give you another chance. Turn and walk peaceably back. If Owl-eye don't kick the bucket we'll call this a misdeal and open a fresh pack. No foolishness; but straight, yes or no."

"Yes it is, then; but my time will come yet."

Without further parley he stepped upon the log, and walked unhesitatingly to the other side, where he was received by Rocky Sam.

"Take him along while we corral the girl," shouted the leader. "I'll see to it that the two don't get together again."

"Durn bad move yer made," growled Rocky, in a whisper.

"Ef yer hed got ten minutes start yer mou't have made the rifle. I didn't think they'd get back afore mornin', nohow. But you've did the squar' thing by me, an' I kin tell yer it'll be all ther better fur you an' ther calico. But mind yer, ef yer try ter blow on me I'll lay yer cold."

"Have no fears that I will attempt it. I would die first. But how is all this to end?"

"Perty bad, like ez not. Now, shut yer grub-trap. I'm afeard that I'll never strike yer fur that thousand."

CHAPTER XIV.

MAGIC MIKE TAKES THE DROP THE WRONG WAY. WHEN Magic Mike darted out from The Office he had already more than half forgotten the affair he had just left behind him.

Although a large share of his winnings had been in notes there was enough of it in gold to make a bulk of uncomfortable weight. Had it not been for that reminder he would not have been likely to remember Senator Storm—or his own remarkable run of good luck.

The mention of the girl with the bears, and the lame violinist, was enough to change all that.

It was not far to the Best Chance, and he was standing at the door before it occurred to him that it might have been better for him to have sought for more explicit information from Chess Barker.

A little questioning might have at least brought out some sort of a description of the men who had so boldly captured the girl; and perhaps some suggestions as to their object.

Coming out of the Best Chance were two men; and they were speaking of the very matter in which he had so deep an interest.

"I tell yer," said one, "it war all a leetle bit ov advertisin'. Now don't you surgit it! That's ther way they do it up back East; only it's jin-erally ther diamonds that's stole, and not ther women theselves. Ther papers takes it up—if they're paid fur it—an' ther publick crowds in ter see ther gal ez lost half er million in jewels."

"Grashus; I'd like ter clap peepers on a heifer ez hed er pile like that ter lose. Blast my eyes ef I wouldn't feel like stealin' her meself. But yer don't think this byer leetle flirt ov a gal kinries 'round any sich a load ez those!"

"No, in course not; though she kin pick up a pile in no time if she kin keep ther racket up. I'll bet she took in a couple hundred dollars worth ov stamps ter-night. When she comes back, dead bu'sted, and jist escaped from ther road-agents, every durned fool'll be too glad ter plank down his sheef v the hat-full of stamps az are ter make her squar' ag'in."

"But whar are she now? It takes pure grit fur a gal like her ter skin out alone inter ther mountings."

"Alone be durned! Ef the i'jeots ez galloped off on ther wild goose chase hed held on, an' follered ther cuss with ther b'ar, b'ucher rocks they'd found her sure. Allee samey, I wouldn't keer ter fool 'round ther grizzly cuss. He's jist 'bout gittin' big enough ter be p'ison contankerous."

"That's so, too. Oh, I tell yer, they're a quisby set; an' I guess I ain't got no call to meddle. I'm goin' home dead bu'sted; an' it's more'n half their fault. I hed a purty fair clæn up, an' blamed ef it lasted fur enough ter get half-way drunk. Pete must 'a' watered his whisk'. Ther p'ison didn't bite half strong."

The two men were rough, no-account fellows: but the idea of the one struck home when it hit Mike Marshall. He knew something about such games, and the more he thought of it the more possible it appeared to him that it had been played on the Bar.

He made up his mind in an instant.

If any one could find the missing girl it would be Lame Luke; and if that worthy was at a loss, the two together could do no more than each separately.

No Marshall made his inquiries, not as to the road by which Alta had disappeared, but as to the direction taken by Lame Luke. Without trouble, or divulging bi's intentions, he learned all that he expected to be able to; and then, on foot, moved away.

The general direction was not hard to follow. After going some little distance, he struck off among the hills.

Up to this point he knew he was in Lame Luke's footsteps; but for the future he would have to be guided as much by chance as by skill.

"The question is, whether my streak is all broke up, or whether it's still running my way. If the last, I'll be dead sure to go ther right way, and run them down before morning. Luck or no luck, in the long run I'm sure to come out right myself."

So he muttered; and then, being certain that he was beyond the limits of the camp, and free from all chance of observation, he looked around him carefully.

"I reckon I can't strike a better place than this. I've bit it rich to-night, and it won't do for me to be carting around all this plunder. Here's the spot for a cache."

It was a risk that he was going to take; but there was more of prudence than recklessness in that risk.

He did not care to confide his gains to any of the strangers of Walnut Bar, and he very frankly admitted to himself that it was quite likely that before he got through with this trail he would have a chance to be robbed four or five times over.

Accordingly, he emptied his pockets.

First he selected four or five notes of large denomination and some smaller change, which he hid about his person. The balance he made into a bundle.

Selecting a large flat rock that lay a little off from the roadway, he turned it up, and underneath it hid the treasure that amounted to a little fortune.

Then he carefully replaced the stone, gave another keen glance around to fix the spot thoroughly in his memory, and heaved a sigh of relief.

"If I turn my toes up there will be a chance for some poor devil to strike just about the richest pocket of the season; but I just hope it

will rest there safely till I come back. If not, what's the difference? I'm a waif in the wind, now, and money is no longer an object."

He turned away and pushed up the narrow, strange defile without hesitation, his keen eyes roving from one side to the other and back again, ready to take in the slightest trace of the man and beast whose trail he had lost but a short time before.

Here and there it seemed to him that he saw traces; but with the uncertain light he could not be altogether sure.

Finally he reached a spot where the natural trail appeared to come to an abrupt end.

Right in front of him there rose a wall of rock, over which it was almost impossible for a footman to scramble, let alone a horse with a rider.

"That seems to settle it. If Lame Luke is following on a sure thing I'll find the party somewhere on ahead. They take her off on horseback, and she dodges in here, just where she knows no one up in the trails around here will follow. A good thing I played a lone hand on this. I'll find them yet. Then for a general clean-up of my own affairs. But just now I must find some way of getting over this dump. They didn't turn back, and I'll swear they're not on this side."

He looked around again, however. It was possible that there was some secret recess, some hiding-place, where the party of whom he was in pursuit might be concealed.

No such place was there, that he could find, and he turned back to the wall across the canyon, carefully measuring with his eye its uncertain height.

It was almost impossible to find the most practicable point, since the whole lower part was in shadow.

He peered, he felt; and finally, drawing himself upward to the top of a huge boulder, began his upward progress without any very definite idea of how far he would be able, from that starting-point, to go.

Once or twice he nearly lost his footing.

Again he reached places from which there seemed to be no outlet.

The difficulties made him certain that there was either some better roadway or that Alta, the bear queen, had not come that way.

He struggled on, all the same. He had gone too far to retreat. The distance either way was not so great, yet it seemed likely to be more dangerous to attempt to descend than to continue the ascent.

In fact, the roadway grew more and more practicable, and finally he stood upon the crest of the natural barricade.

It was lighter here, and he could see more of his surroundings.

It appeared to him as though he now stood on the breastway of a huge dam, from which the water had in some unseen way made its escape. As he had heard of the flood that had made the fortune of the camp he had lately left, Marshall had no doubt that this was one of the channels through which the water had come. Probably the rock here was barren, or even the difficulties of access would not have saved the spot from intrusion.

"I've got this much of a start on the road, but I swear I might about as well go into camp until morning. I've trusted to my luck so far, but I begin to think it's played out. If it has, then Mike Marshall will have to get down to fine work."

The man spoke aloud; and though fairly puzzled, there was the same carelessness in his voice that had been there when he fought the road-agents in the early evening, or faced the tiger later on.

"Yes, by Heavens! I'll run the cards out sooner than give them a chance to make the trump. It's the risk that makes the game, and a fool's risk it is that I'm playing; but I'll head him and save her, in spite of them both. If she found me, she'd kill me just as readily as she would crush a fly. If I find her, I'll make her listen to a little reason, and then—well, what then? Hand in my checks, perhaps. I'm about tired of living, anyhow, and it begins to look as though steel, lead or rope won't kill him."

So in a disjointed way he soliloquized, now picking his way downward, till he found himself once more in the natural bed of the canyon.

He halted again for a moment or two; but the restless spirit in him would not allow him to stop long, and he went on again at a faster pace than he knew.

Looking to one side he gave a start. His eyes had fallen upon a side canyon that it seemed possible to follow.

The unexpectedness of the discovery drew him. He believed in his luck, and on the instant turned aside, finding himself in a rising little trail, that was otherwise almost as smooth as a floor.

To his surprise, before long he came out upon a level plateau and stood upon the edge of another great gash.

"Not far wrong, eh, old man! Here's the secret. Lame Luke is near and waiting. I'll bet rocks. If I can strike him I'll have two chances

to do good. He's honest if he is the Old Boy when you scratch his fur the wrong way. I've a mind to shout."

Magic Mike did shout; but it was not in the way he had intended. As he stood there peering downward, trying to pierce the darkness that hid the unknown depths of the canyon below, a form suddenly arose behind him.

There was no sound, no shadow, no anything to attract his attention; but he felt a presence and wheeled, quicker than thought, his hands already on his revolvers.

But at the same time the dark form flashed forward, there was the noise of a crushing blow; and with one snarling cry, Mike Marshall shot forward and then downward, along the rocky wall of the canyon.

Then there was a short, hoarse laugh, and another figure appeared from a niche in the rock out of which the first had started.

"Yer did that well, Larry. But yer hadn't orter knocked him overboard. He's a goner sure."

"Faith, an' why shu'dn't he be a goner! Be the powers it's an hour er two ther bloody spalpeen has bed us watchin' him, an' sure ther mon ez kims pruin' an' pickin' round here deserves all he gits. I didn't think Blazin' Tom's gizzard 'd go sick fur sich a leetle thrick ez that."

"Sick be durned! Don't be er bully-blazin' fool. Ther mou't be more plunder in his pockets than brains in his head; and how are we ter git at it? That's what makes me sick."

"Sure, an' ther's sinse in that; but he'll kape till mornin'. By that time we'll be off guard, an' we kin shlip 'round an' down, an'— Howly Moses, phat's that?"

A savage growl was followed by a shout; and then the Irishman who had been addressed as Larry jerked out a revolver, and fired two quick shots.

The growl rose into a roar, drowning a single low moan. The first shot had sent a man down in a crumpled heap; while the second buried itself in the body of a bear, that reared itself upon its hind legs at the touch of the bullet. The two had come quietly up the trail that Magic Mike had followed, and the result was a double and deadly surprise.

Lame Luke was down and motionless but the wound that would have dropped a man only served to enrage his companion.

There was no lack of evil courage in the outlaws; and when they could do no better, cornered in the niche, they closed in for a desperate fight.

Unfortunately for them, it was war at close quarters.

They threw themselves on the animal, there was a short, hurried, breathless struggle, a shot or two and then, suddenly all three went over the ledge, and dropped downward into the chasm, into which Magic Mike had fallen.

CHAPTER XV.

THE GRIZZLY IN THE GULCH.

SOME time after daylight Magic Mike opened his eyes and gazed around him in a dazed, uncertain way.

He had come back to consciousness after what seemed to have been the most horrid of nightmares.

Even yet he did not understand what had befallen him, or where he was.

He was lying on the green sward, flat on his back, and above he saw the wavering branches of the trees; and between the limbs a patch of blue sky. Where was he; and why was it that he was unable to move?

"I've had the nightmare before; but hanged if it ever took bold just like this. Let me see. Where am I, and how did I get here? Eh?"

He turned his head a little, by an effort, and still looking straight upward saw that he lay at the base of a cliff.

What brought the exclamation from him was not the sight of the cliff; but something else, that was terrible to look at.

Just above him, balanced across a bough, was a human body, that hung face down, swaying slightly and slowly; and the whole lower jaw seemed to have been torn away, while the clothing was torn from the breast and shoulders, leaving a gaping wound exposed.

The sight was sickening, and Marshall made another determined effort to move from the spot, for it seemed to him that the corpse must certainly fall, and he lay exactly beneath it.

The attempt was in no measure successful; though a sharp pain shot through him, and then a swimming in his head caused him to drop motionless, though not altogether bereft of sense.

The spell, however, was broken.

After a little he became somewhat stronger; and now he remembered how, the night before, he had been hurled off of the edge of the cliff.

Was this the man who did it; or was it another victim of the murderer who had attacked him? Into what sort of a den had he stumbled?

As he mentally asked himself these questions his eyes dropped downward. He was made now to see what was immediately around him.

The first thing he saw was another body. Here too were the same savage wounds.

The two bodies could hardly have been more mangled if they had been blown up by dynamite.

It was not worth while to waste sympathy on them. It was high time to think of himself. He raised his limbs and twisted his neck.

No bones were broken.

"I reckon I've plumped head-first from up there, and those branches broke my fall somewhat. It's a clear case of concussion; but my brain seems clear enough now, and I can just swear that my usual luck brought me through. What these other cusses were up to is more than I can account for, but I guess they were hit by a streak of lightning. Thunder! Why didn't I think of it? They've run foul of a grizzly, or else Lame Luke has been around with his educated specimen of *ursa major*. I knew it."

In the soft ground Magic Mike saw the dint he had made himself, when he lighted; and close to it the track of the bear; which had undoubtedly given a sniff or two at him before he scampered away.

"It is time for me to be getting out of this," thought Marshall with quick decision, when he had once mastered the facts of the case.

"Bruin may come back, and if he finds me living he won't be half so tender with me as when he thought I was dead. If these roosters are agents, as I feel pretty sure they must be, some of their pards will be nosing around to see what has become of them. I'd sooner meet Lame Luke's choicest pet than one of them and not be able to hold a shooting-iron straight. I wouldn't wonder if I was in a fix, but I'll crawl along after that trail. If Old Eph can get out, I can follow, and maybe I'll strike Lame Luke before I get through."

It seemed very much like a trap that he found himself in, but he had hopes that the bear knew of some passable point. He gathered himself up and staggered off, following the trail with a headstrong courage.

It was lucky that he did so. He gained strength as he went, and hardly had he got out of sight around a bend in the high wall in the canyon, when there was the sound of voices above.

Two of the outlaws had come to the point where they had expected to find their comrades and were, at first, surprised and troubled to discover that they had vanished.

Then they noted traces of a death-struggle, and looking over the cliff, caught sight of the corpses below them.

"Pou me soul, they've struck it rough. A tearing old grizzly must have mounted them—I'll bet it's the same old chap that gave the boys a bustle in the north pass last week. He's just chawed 'em, an' throwed 'em overboard. What are we goin' ter do about it?"

"Waugh! Et makes me sick ter look at 'em. Cuss ther place anyhow, whar ther' mou't be a hull regelement firin', an' yer couldn't hear ther fust crack. What kin we do? We mou't swing over ef we bed a lass'-rope, an' plant 'em; but I think it 'd be a durned sight safer ter wait till some 'un bes time ter go round an' try ther upper eend. They'll keep thar fur a day er so; an' we'd better be holdin' our eyes peeled, ter see ez ther cussed brute don't kin back an' make two mouthfuls ov us. Thar's his trail, an' frum ther rocks I shu'd think he war hit jist hard enuf ter be nasty. I don't want any o' him in mine."

"Right yer are, pard. But I reckon one ov us hed better go back an' report ez how poor Larry an' Blazin' Tom didn't come in 'cause they couldn't."

"An' which one are ter go?"

"What! yer ain't afeared ter stay hyar with er couple stiffs?"

"Not much. Ther stiffs are werry stiff—an' I ain't a-keerin' fur any man, dead er alive. What I are afeared ov are Old Eph hisself. Right thar are whar I takes water an' eats dirt."

"Sho! are that it! Betcher life thar ain't no danger now. He's laid down long erneuf ter not keer 'bout movin'. Honest Injun, though: I wouldn't keer 'bout bein' hyar ter-night, but I'll stay now; an' glad ter git rid ov ther walk thar an' hyar ag'in."

"That's whar I live; but ef yer thinkin' ther he ole grizzly ez tuk in ther poor boyees are rolled up in his blanket, yer bad fooled, fur thar he are now."

The two had as much nerve as ordinary men; but they knew a thing or two about the prowess of a wounded grizzly, and being armed only with revolver and knife, small blame to them, with such a ghastly reminder below, if they did not care to meet him.

The man who had seemed inclined to vaunt his own bravery looked wildly around.

"Oh, yer needn't be 'larmed. He ain't anyways nigh, er ye'd 'a' seen me streekin' it up ther trail like a quarter boss on ther last hundred yards. Thar he are, on ther other side ov ther kenyon, ding blast him! See! Right yonder, a-peokin' an' a-peerin', just at us, an' then down, ez though he'd like ter kim across ef it warn't ter durned fur ter jump."

They watched the animal for a time, wondering if it could really be the one that had slain

Larry and Blazing Tom; and if it was, how he could have reached his present position.

The brute sat there very much unconcerned.

It might be wounded; but the hurt was hardly more than skin-deep or it could not have reached the position it now occupied, in so short a time.

It returned the stare of the outlaws, and when they finally turned away it shook its head in a very sensible sort of way, and rising, scrambled out of sight behind the boulder in front of which it had been sitting.

Magic Mike had no idea how near he had been to escaping discovery. He still felt sore and bruised, but by this time had recovered his strength, and was pushing on up the canyon in search of the outlet he hoped to find at the upper end. The gash no doubt ended soon in one way or another. It was not an old water-course, but a very ancient fissure, formed by volcanic action ages ago, that had honeycombed these hills, and made them such a convenient place of refuge for the outlaws that infested them.

After a little he too saw the grizzly that the outlaws had been watching, and he felt relieved. Unless it threw itself over the cliff it was not likely to reach him very soon. For the present he was safe from the danger that he had been momentarily expecting.

The bear saw him. It looked this way and that, and then burried on along the edge of the cliff, taking the same direction that Marshall was following.

Sometimes the animal was visible, looking backward. Sometimes it disappeared. Evidently it did not intend to lose sight of the man below.

"He means to have me, and he's a smashing lump. If I had half sense I'd turn 'round and try the other route. But I never did have sense and I suppose he'd follow all the same. He has his eye on me, and there'll be business in this canyon before long. If he'll wait till I get my nerve back I'll try and hold my end up. I won't be good for his eye outside of a rod, and that's a confounded small limit."

He drew his revolvers and went bravely on.

The canyon seemed to be ending in a gradual rise; and sure enough, in a narrow path, he came upon the grizzly, squatted and waiting.

At sight of Marshall the animal rose upon its hind feet and waddled forward.

"I wouldn't," said Marshall, still advancing. "Indeed I wouldn't. I understand that the chances of the deal are in your favor, but if you insist on a rushing game you'll find me an awful rooster. I didn't do you any harm: what do you want to take it out of me fer? Why, they knocked me clean off, over into the canyon, and when I saw how you had taken them both in out of the cool I really shouted. But there's no fooling about me. At ten yards I'm going to plug you, so mind your eye."

Marshall had reached a spot where he found a better foothold; and as the grizzly still advanced he halted, and half raising his hand, gazed keenly at his antagonist. If he could have been sure that this was one of the pets of bear queen he would have been more hopeful of the result of the struggle, which he knew must come; but he was not certain, and it looked more than likely that this was one of the natural denizens of these canyons, and in a very bad humor, too.

Then, just before the distance of ten yards, which Mike had fixed as the limit of his first shot, had been reached, the bear halted.

The pistols in Marshall's hand began to raise. He was willing to give a few feet for a shot at a stationary mark.

Then, as the hammer clicked its warning, the bear made a swift movement with its fore paws and its head fell back, revealing in its stead a rough, savage face, from which a pair of keen eyes glared at Marshall viciously.

"Lame Luke, by thunder!" exclaimed Mike in amazement.

CHAPTER XVI.

LEFT IN THE LURCH.

THERE was no doubt about the genuineness of Mike Marshall's surprise. He had been uncertain up to this minute whether the figure approaching was that of a wild grizzly of the mountains, or the tamed beast that he knew Luke Liver had taken out with him on the trail; but that it was one or the other he had never for an instant doubted.

The sight gave him instant relief.

Reckless a man as late events had showed him to be, and thorough believer in his own luck, he was not so wild as to desire a battle in which there was every danger and no possible profit. The ghostly reminders of the brute's prowess that he had lately seen had not sapped his courage; but they certainly had not whetted his appetite for the fray.

First came the feeling of surprise, then one of relief.

After that brief exclamation he threw back his pistols into their holsters, as being the surest sign of pacific intention, and advanced with outstretched hand.

"Lame Luke Liver, sure enough. Shake, old pard. I never dreamed you weren't the sure

enough thing; and the man that can fool Mike Marshall is no slouch. You may not care for my help, because you always did want to paddle your own canoe; but I'm here on the same trail as yourself. If you want a good man to back you you needn't go any further; and I reckon you know that."

Lame Luke's face was pale, and his eyes had a strange, wandering look.

"Waugh! Who are you?" he growled. "I kin hyar ter put yer in er hole an' I'd 'a' did it ef yer hadn't tolle me er string er stuff ez may be true, an' ag'in it mayn't. Ef I hadn't thort thar warn't no man ez would play it so low down ez ter lie ter a sick grizzly I'd hed yer down an' me teeth in yer throat. Be ye one ov ther gang? It arn't too late yit."

"Come, come, don't be so bloody suspicious. You used to know Mike Marshall; and by the same token you ought to know that he wasn't treated altogether right, though that's neither here nor there. I heard that the little woman was in trouble and I chipped straight in, the same as I would for any other, though I won't deny I was looking for her anyhow. I've got great news for her, Luke Liver, all heard by chance, and we must find her. Are you on the trail?"

"I don't edzakly understand," answered Luke, putting up one paw-incased hand to his forehead.

"Thar's no man by ther name ov Marshall ez I know ov, an' I don't rekermember you. Mebbe you be one ov ther hounds ez set up this hyar biz. Ef you be, say ther word an' down yer go."

Under his disguise the man had his pistols ready. If he had chosen he could have drilled Marshall; but the latter showed no signs of uneasiness.

"Don't you remember Mike Marshall—Magic Mike they called him sometimes? You and I have met many a time and often. I saved your life once; maybe you have forgotten that."

"Ye'r' lyin', boy. If yer hed saved Luke Liver's life he wouldn't hev bin apt ter furgit yer. No, I'll sw'ar I never see'd yer afore. Ye'r' a good-lookin' young feller too, an' it's a mighty pity; but I'll hev ter kill yer. Hez yer any prayers ter say?"

"Come, don't heap it up too high. I'm your friend—and the girl's. You remember the time well enough. There were five of them—Greasers—that had you corraled in a ring of knives, and you had left your shooting-irons in the tent. It was about the girl, you know. One of them had insulted her, and you knocked him down."

"Yer lyin', 'laddy, boy. No sich Greasers hev I seen' ez five on 'em 'ud made more ner a mouthful fur Luke Liver. I shell hev ter kill yer, bein' ez ye'r' a bad young man. An' it's a pity, too, fur yer are so purty."

"Thunder and blazes!" exclaimed Marshall, suddenly, looking squarely at the man, and better understanding his restless, roving eyes. "The poor fellow is crazy as a loon."

If this was so there was a good deal of method in his madness, for he had been able to find his way through the canyons better than the outlaws, and deceive some as sharp eyes as had ever watched him when life and death seemed to depend upon it.

"Mebbe ye'r' right," continued Liver, not at all angered.

"Suthin' happened to me las' night. Some one blew at me an' his breath hit me right hyar. I ain't bin just so clear thar at all times sence then, but don't yer play me fur a fool. I'm lookin' fur Alty, an' I'm goin' ter find her."

He had touched the top of his head tenderly, and Marshall's suspicion was confirmed. In one way or another the old man had received a blow, a shot, or something, on his head, and the result was this wreck.

The man in velvet held out his hand and answered, earnestly:

"So am I. Put it there, pard. It's the hand of a white man, and you needn't be afraid to take it."

"But what does yer want with her? I like yer eyes—they go right through one—but I doesn't gi'n ther gal away. An' I've seen ther devil bissell with jist sich eyes."

"John Melchor—her father, you know—is dead. There's a million waiting back East for the waif of the foot-hills, and there's one or two men in the world that could and would make it for themselves by cutting her throat if they had the chance. I've been looking for her for a month to tell her, and I found where she was just too late."

"But who are you ez takes all this trouble? Yer hez stamps in yer eye, fur thar ain't no man ez would fool erway a month on a gal ez war a stranger."

"So you don't remember me. Well, I can only tell you again. I'm Magic Mike, card-player and sport. I'm dealing it to you square, for the sake of old times. If your knowledge-box ever gets straightened up you will understand me better. Now, what are you up to?"

"Mebbe it's so; mebbe it's so. Them's ther fellers likely ez stole her away. But Lame Luke's on 'her trail. He knows this hyar kidentry like ez tho' he war bernesd hyar, an'

he'll find her. Old Eph is a-helpin' ov him, an' ar' on ther trail now. I'll take yer fur a pard, 'case yer eyes looks honest, but ef yer bin a-lyin', I'll give Eph ther word an' he'll chaw yer. Kini on. I bez ther p'nt ter strike fur, an' I'll take you erlong. But they'll be war thar, an' bloody murder can't stop me."

"You're right. Shove on your head-cap and lead out. When the battle begins you'll find Magic Mike holding trumps by the handfuls."

Without a shadow of hesitation, Magic Mike followed. They went up the pathway which Liver had just descended, by a route that lay along the ridge.

From time to time they halted and looked around. It was possible that they might be observed, and the dangers to result from discovery were twice as great to Liver, as they were before Mike Marshall had joined him.

Suddenly the latter threw himself upon the ground.

At the movement the sham grizzly squatted in front of him and gave a tremendous growl. Lame Luke had played his part too often with the bear queen not to do it now to the very life.

The tops of several moving heads could be seen on the other side of the canyon, and hardly had the two taken their position when, from behind the rocks that had so nearly concealed them, three horsemen came into view, slowly descending the trail.

The distance was too great for revolver practice, and there were no carbines to be seen, so that the two could watch at their leisure, and without danger, though Mike Marshall was perfectly willing to lie concealed while Liver followed the two with his eyes. At that distance there was no danger of the disguise being penetrated.

Marshall had a pretty fair view, however, if it was a brief one; and photographed the features of the men in his brain.

They were outlaws, and he had not a doubt but that they were going out to ply their vocation. Let them go. If he met them again in the same guise he would know them. Meantime it was more important to know where they came from. After Lame Luke had taken him to the place of refuge that he understood was somewhere near, and he had grown a little stronger, if Alta really was not there, he would look for the hiding-place, where she would be.

It was not much further that they had to go.

They came to another gash—an opening that yawned across their path.

Lame Luke pointed to a sharp point of rock, and around it was looped a rope.

"Go down," he said. "Yer'll find Old Eph waitin' fur us; an' thar's grub thar—piles er grub. Load up then, an' we'll give 'em a shake. You, an' me, an' Eph—we kin jist show 'em Spanish—thunder, yes."

Not one man in a thousand would have cared to risk the descent, but Marshall did not hang back.

Weakened though he had been, he had the sublimest confidence in his own powers. This time a fall would be certain death; but he did not intend to fall.

If he wanted to keep in with Lame Luke, there could be no hesitation.

He boldly took hold of the rope, and swung himself over the edge.

Hand over hand he descended yard after yard, slowly but safely.

When at last his feet touched the canyon below he gave a sigh of relief, and leaned wearily against the rocky wall.

He had not realized how much his strength had gone from him.

And then suddenly the rope that had dropped away from his grasp, sprung upward with a bound.

He looked to see what that meant.

The crazy eyes of Luke Liver were fixed upon him, a hundred feet above—the mask of bear-skin thrown back.

"Ha, ha!" came the gruff laugh.

"An' you're Magic Mike. Ha, ha! You lie! He's dead. You're the devil ez killed poor leetle Alty's folks, an' stole her hard earnin's. You'd 'a' killed her, er wuss, ef it hadn't bin she war too sharp fur ther sharper. She's bin a-lookin' fur yer sence, an' she'll kill yer on sight. Look arter him, Eph. Gi'n him his grub an' treat him right; but when he tries ter get away, tell him he's in er trap, an' Alty'll shoot him like er rat when she sees him. I'm goin' fur Alty now; an' oh! won't it be er nice leetle tea-party when we gits back! Watch him, Eph! Lame Luke leaves him fur you ter take keer on. Thar's no way ter git out, but watch him, anyhow."

Then the shaggy head above disappeared, and Marshall, fairly caught, was left in the mountain pocket alone with old Eph, who, with a warning growl, shambled out of a niche in the rock.

This animal was a sure enough article; and Marshall, from the moment he heard that growl, had not the shadow of a doubt on that score.

name as Martin Lee, by some chance stumbled in at Poison Pete's.

It was not exactly the place one would suppose a stranger would choose to spend an evening; but there he was, and very much at home he managed to make himself. He treated the boys, bucked against monte, and listened to the profane conversation in an easy way that showed that if he was a tenderfoot he had learned something along the road.

After a little, Tombstone Tom drew closer to him.

No one had seen that worthy refuse a chance to imbibe at another's expense, and the natural conclusion was that he had marked the stranger for a victim.

There were some winks and nods, but no one interfered. As long as there was no one drunk or on the war-path Poison Pete's place was not altogether and by long odds the worst place in Arizona.

The stranger seemed to be taken with Burke, in spite of his looks. He set up the drinks for him with a cordial looseness, and the acquaintance developed rapidly.

By and by the two shook hands and went out together, somewhat to the regret of several who would have been well pleased to share in the invitation.

They walked away from the Best Chance in silence, ostensibly directing their footsteps toward the shebang of Nevada Bill, at the other end of the camp.

When they were fairly out of the range of any eavesdroppers, Tombstone Tom turned his face toward his companion.

"An' now, me noble dook, expound. Ther man ez wunks et me fur a blind boss gits left bad; an' I don't reckon you're one ov them kind. Yer bin sayin' straight ez a dot, I want yer—how bad duz it strike yer? I tell yer I'm er competent man, able fur anythin'. Ef yer wants ter spread yer leetle lay-out with Tombstone Tom fur capper, jist say ther word an' ye'll hear me fairly bowl."

"I'm not altogether satisfied that you are the man I want; but I have my suspicions."

"Look hyar, what are yer game? I shu'd snort ef I warn't able fur most anythin'; but ef I knowed yer eggzact game I c'u'd tell yer better about meself."

"I've got a big thing in view, and I can't be too careful about letting outsiders in. I'll want some help, but it must be of the right stripe. Tell the truth, now. Do you want to work if you see big money at the other end; and what is your best hold?"

"Does I want ter work? Can't yer see honest industry stickin' outen me 'bout five foot an' ten inches ov solid bone an' muskel? Work's jist my name—an' wages. Yer needn't go any furder. I knowes yer game. It's in ther quartz in Snorter Gulch. Yer hev ther stamps ter go fur it, an' yer wants me ter boss ther job. Didn't I see yer talkin' ter ole Billy Snorter when nobody war lookin' but me? Yer bit me wbar I live, for I dunno nothin' else. I'm a ho-ole perspec-tor; got an eye fur ther perecious metuls, an' ther work I can't git outen a gang ain't in ther' bides. Ob, you're solid now; jist sail in. Ef Snorter Gulch don't lay 'way over ther Comstock lode when you an' me runs it, I dunno beans. Gi'n us yer paw on it, an' le'ss go take er drink."

Like the clack of a mill-wheel when the gate is up and the race full, Tombstone Tom rolled out his words, while Lee listened and shook his head.

"So that's your style, is it? You don't look like the man to handle the pick and shovel the spade."

"But I'm jist that same. Never knowed how ter do nothin' else. True vein er fissure, chimbley rock er borsin'—I know everything in that line. Ef yer don't b'lieve it, try me. You an' me kin jist work ther Snorter for all he's wuth."

"You're rather fast. I was talking to a man they told me bad that name, but I didn't know he had a mine for sale; and it's not that line I'm on just now. I was in hopes you sometimes did something with the trigger—fancy shooting, you know, and not too particular who was in range. That's the kind of a man I want."

"I'm afeard, pard, ez we're both mistook'en," responded Burke, in a hesitating, disappointed kind of way.

"No shu'e in mine. Don't say nothin' more about it. I ain't got but this one life ter live, an' I ain't taking no chances ter fetch ther climax to it."

"So you're not open for a job that has a spice of danger in it?"

"Not ef this court knows herself. But whatcher think ov doin'? I'm ole lightnin' on advice; an' bein' it's you, won't charge er cent."

"Talk is cheap; but as they say, it takes money to buy land. If you can't help me in a risky game, the less I say to you the better. And there was money in it."

At the word money, Tom Burke's eyes began to glitter again.

"Ef ther's money in it, an' not too durned much reesk, wall, ter tell ther truth, I'm jest ready fur most 'anything to make er

CHAPTER XVII.

A FILLY THAT WON'T TROT.

A YOUNG man of smooth, clear face, who looked frank and careless, and who gave his

raise. I never war so hard up since 'forty-nine."

"It's a risk for me to trust you; but you're the man I want if you've got the nerve."

"Spit it out!"

"I tell you fairly and squarely, then—and either way you can't harm me—that I've got a double game to play. I'm after revenge, and I'm after gold. There's a chance hero in Wall-Bar for both."

"An' who's ther bloomin' shrub yer wants tuk in outer ther wet? Fur that's yer fust move, ef I've got down what yer drivin' at fine enough."

"Hold on, I don't say that I want the man killed—not with a bullet, at least. Curse him! it's the rope that will do the business if the thing is worked right."

"But w'ol's be bin a-doin' ter yer, an' who are ther man? Don't be so all-fired long a-comin' to ther p'int."

"Curse him! he robbed me of every cent. That is what he did. And slaughtered my pard. Maybe you've heard ov it. Ned Trainor was my pard's name; and when he called Simon Storm—the thief that he was—the villain shot him down in his tracks, without mercy."

Tombstone Tom gave utterance to a whistle of complete surprise.

"Simon Storm! Why, that's the man ez are hyar, now! You'll find him at ther shebang of Johnny Goodman. Go for him, pard, an' git even."

"I daren't move myself. I've picked up a heap since the time he killed poor Ned and ruined me, but I haven't the money behind me that he has; and if I went for him, he'd shoot me on sight, and make it all right with the boys; or, if I drilled him, there's plenty would say it was a drop game I put upon him on account of old timin'."

"Then watcher goin' ter do?"

"Play it fine on him. See here: I don't believe in this stuff that they've been going over in camp about the road-agents. It don't hang together. There's something rotten somewhere, and I'm going for him then. Before I get through, I'll leave him banging to the end of a rope, as I said before. I'll give you a thousand dollars if you'll get it down on him tight that he's one of the gang himself."

"You're ez cranky es er bed-bug in October. Why, it can't be did. Fact are I tried ter strike him meself, an' he just looked through my hand an' sez it wa'n't good. Then I throwed 'em to ther middle an' sed nothin'. That boss won't trot."

"I'll give you a thousand down if you'll make it gallop, then. If you can't find the strength to put the spurs in, I've made a bigger mistake in you than I ever did in a man; and I've trusted a good many. Storm's the only thief that played me foul."

Tombstone Tom scratched his head reflectively.

"Pard, I'd jest admire ter corral yer M. Ef that war ever a man lued money it are this individ. But I don't see my way cl'ar; an' afore I go ter buckin' ag'in' a man like ole Storm I've got ter know better who's behind me. Yer see'tain't prezak y in my line. I'll take yer keard, tho'; an' ef I see ary openin' I'll let yer know. Thousan' dollar snaps ain't plenty, an' I'd reely like ter ketch on. Ef yer think better on ther Snorter Gulch biz, come my way. Thar ye'll hit me whar I live."

"So that's all you can do for me," answered the young man in a contemptuous sort of a way. "You're not much after all—just what you look to be. Never was more fooled in my life."

"Ner I neither," hastily answered Tombstone Tom, "but I go yer one better. Hands up, an' no gum games! Ef you sellers in ther shadder than move hand er foot I'll blow him through."

The tramp's voice lost its easy drawl; his motions their cool deliberation. The fact was, he had finished acting before he had finished speaking. One hand fastened on Lee's collar with a grip of iron, while the other thrust the barrel of a pistol into his ear with a savage earnestness that threatened to jam it clear through."

The hands of the young man went up promptly in response to the order. There was no mistaking the ring in the tone. It meant choose life or death, and be mighty quick ab'ut it.

Meantime Lee was between the man from Tombstone, and the two that were lurking near, whom by chance he had only seen.

But the rest were every whit as cool.

"You're drifting up the wrong slope, old man. Mighty sharp you think you are; but there are other men just as sharp. Maybe a broken-down bummer like you couldn't hurt a man like Simon Storm, and maybe you could; but we've drawn your teeth. There is the senator himself, and there is a good reliable witness to swear they heard you tell me you had tried to blackmail him; and didn't really know anything against him. If there's any more of it it will be you that will be the hero of the necktie party. Let up, now, and git. We have no more use for you."

"Ahem!" answered Tombstone Tom, without, however, withdrawing the cocked revolver.

"Looks ez tho' yer had played it slick on the old man; but he ain't prezactly er condemned fool, an' this racket ain't over yet. Senator Storm an' ther reliable citizen kin stay whar they are, an' you jist waltz erlong back with Tombstone Tom, till he gits outer range. Ef I hadn't got it fine on yer they'd sooner trusted ter a slug in ther ear."

Tom Burke was not to be taken off of his guard; and as he held the drop so certainly there seemed nothing to do but to comply.

The two, during their conversation, had walked away from the Bar, and the spot was the very one for an ambuscade. If some one had shot down the man from Tombstone, it would have been hard to connect Lee with the affair or to discover the real perpetrators. The readiness with which Lee allowed himself to be marched away might have made some persons careless, but Burke never let up until they had reached the front of the Best Chance.

"You kin go now," he said, lowering his hand a little but still holding the drop.

"It's a cold day when Tombstone Tom gits left. When I can't kick I kin wiggle. You kin depart on yer ear now, an' ef yer think yer kin draw afore I kin pull, try it on; but Pison Pete's won't be healthy fur a young man ov your size fur ther next hour er so."

"Have it your own way," answered Lee quite coolly. "Your teeth are drawn—try to bite, if you dare."

Tombstone Tom laughed sarcastically, and slipped quietly into the Best Chance.

No one outside had noticed the little trouble, and inside the first person that he saw was Senator Storm.

That did surprise him.

CHAPTER XVIII. MISS AURORA SPEAKS HER MIND, AND HAS HER REWARD.

WHEN Wilde and his escort had vanished, the outlaw leader looked coolly up at the rocks, among which Aurora had taken refuge.

"You may as well come down now. He has gone, and it's not very likely he will see you again soon."

No answer came. Probably the girl was crouching among the boulders above.

He turned to his men, with a wave of his hand.

"Bad Ben, you know what to do. Go, and be quick about it. I will wait for you here."

Without reply Bad Ben wheeled, and followed by the men, strode away, leaving Captain Iron-Arm standing in the moonlight just at the narrow bridge that spanned the chasm.

He looked upward again, but still there was no sign of the fugitive, though the moonlight shone brightly upon the spot.

"Come down, I say!" he repeated, this time more sharply. "There is no time for foolishness, and there is much I would say to you before Bad Ben returns. Don't try my patience too much at the outset."

The silence continued, yet it was perfectly impossible that Aurora could have got beyond hearing distance.

Iron-Arm clapped his hand angrily to his hip, then took a step or two toward the rocky wall.

The movement was but a slight one, yet it served to change the direction of the shadows. He could see Aurora a hundred feet above, leaning with her elbows upon a great rock, and looking steadfastly down upon him.

He even saw, or thought he saw, a defiant curl upon her lip, and the sight angered him.

The fingers that were playing with the stock of the revolver closed upon it, and the barrel leaped out and upward, pointing squarely at the young girl.

Quick as was the movement it was met by one as prompt, the moonbeams shimmering off of the polished steel.

"A little careful, Mr. Iron-Arm—a little careful how you point your fire-arms. I've had time for my blood to cool, and I'm not fond of slaying in cold blood; but I'll stand no threats or force. You've had one escape; the next time you can swear that I will hold straighter."

"By Heavens, it's not good for you to put us in mind of that! I've tried to convince the boys that it was all a mistake, but if they once thought you meant it when you dropped poor Carter, I'd have infernal hard work keeping pieces enough together to make a decent funeral."

"Shoot if you want to—you've had one trial at that; in this light you couldn't hit an elephant from up there. Then, when you get through blazing away, come down like a woman of sense. Sooner or later I intend to have a little talk with you, and there is no time like the present, if you don't waste it at both ends."

The reckless disregard of the outlaw seemed to have its effect. She dropped the muzzle and spoke in a voice as careless as his own.

"You miss death by a narrower margin than you are willing to admit. If I didn't know that I could never pass the men below, I believe I would fire. And if I fired you would drop. Keep your distance and I will come down, though I have been tempted to kill you all. Just

remember that I carry death at my finger-ends as well as yourself."

Lightly she sprung from her post of refuge, leaping from rock to rock with wonderful ease and grace, until she stood upon the level floor of the ledge below.

Then she held up her hand, the palm toward him, with a warning gesture.

"Stand there. No nearer, if you please. I will bear what you have to say from a little distance. I don't value my life a farthing. If the pinch comes, I will kill or be killed, and nothing can scare me. You understand?"

"Yes; I know you are a beautiful iceberg, but—"

He ceased speaking, started, wheeled like lightning, raising his revolver as he wheeled.

As the weapon swung up Aurora sprung forward, thrusting the hand to one side, and the bullet went singing wide of its mark, while a dark form, already upon the bridge, buried itself upon him.

The intruder was Lame Luke, clad in his grizzly suit, but with the head thrown back, showing his face white and convulsed with rage.

"I'm hyar, leetle gal. Lame Luke didn't desert yer, an' ye'r safe when he's 'round."

He had acted before he had finished speaking, hurling himself upon Iron-Arm.

The outlaw had been foiled in his first effort and in the second or two of irresolution that followed he was beaten back and down by a powerful blow that a trifle lower down would have shattered his jaw.

Lame Luke had a giant's strength, and when he hit the blow went cut with the force of a trip-hammer.

He gave no second glance at the man he had stricken down, but turned to Aurora.

"Quick, quick, leetle gal, afore they git back! It's ther on'y chance."

Aurora fell back. She did not know this demon with the gleaming eyes. She might have been willing to have Captain Iron-Arm killed; but she was not ready to cast in her lot with the slayer. She had her revolver already out from its hiding place, but he was too quick for her. If he had the strength, with the garb, of a grizzly, he was as quick as a panther. She had counted on time to escape while he wrangled or fought with Iron-Arm, but no time was given her.

As his right hand dropped from the blow, his left arm swept around her waist. Snatching her from the ground as though she had been an infant, Luke fled back by the way he had come, leaving the road-agent chief still motionless and void of sense.

Five minutes passed. Then in the direction in which Liver had vanished could be heard the sound of returning footsteps and the little band of Bad Ben put in an appearance.

The men came steadily forward, and it was evident that they had as yet no inkling of what had been going on in their absence. In some way Lame Luke had avoided them.

First of all, Bad Ben crossed the long log.

As he reached the near side of the canyon he halted suddenly.

Before him, prone upon the ground, lay the body of his leader. His amazed cry startled the rest. They hurried forward; and among them they brought a prisoner.

"Curse all this gal bizness," growled Bad Ben, in a husky voice, as he raised his captain's head from the hard rock, so that the moonlight could the better fall upon it.

"He's fooled round ther shemale cyclone an' bin hit by lightnin'. Wbar is she? Blast my bloody pickters, ef ther ain't goin' ter be suthin' did!"

Iron-Arm gave a gasp and opened his eyes, though he still lay limply on the arm of the lieutenant.

"Whar's ther gal? What's happened? Tell us quick. Ther's bin sum foul play, an' ef we don't hustle 'round ther may be hemp stretched. I'll bet yer rocks she's goin' ter sell us out."

While he spoke he was applying the mouth of a flask to the whitened lips; and Iron-Arm was recovering with marvelous rapidity.

A little later he staggered to his feet, and stared wildly around.

"I tell you, it was the devil!" he gasped.

"He came on me like a whirlwind and before I could see who he was, or what was going to happen, he knocked me down. Off, men! He must have gone that way—bow comes it that you did not pass him? But, I forgot, he is no man—he is a grizzly. After them and, curse them, shoot both down without mercy!"

A cry interrupted him—with a bound a woman stood before him.

It was the prisoner just brought there by Bad Ben.

"Oh, at last! I have found you again and alive! Traitor, villain, fiend, devil that you were and are, you can evade me no longer. It is not too late for vengeance!"

Her voice rose almost to a scream, and she shook with anger. Had it not been that Bad Ben caught her by the wrists she would have buried herself upon Iron-Arm—all unweaponed as she was.

The sound of her voice brought the outlaw to

himself sooner than almost anything else could have done.

He gathered himself up to face her, a mocking smile coming to his lips. Was he in jest or earnest?

"So you have found me at last? I heard you were looking for me, and as it might be unpleasant to have you talking around loose in public places I thought I'd arrange for the meeting when it would be more convenient for me. These gentlemen, some of whom have had the pleasure of looking after your welfare for the last thirty hours or so, are perfectly willing to listen to any statement you may have to make. I'm away!"

"I did not think the man lived with such satanic heart as yours!"

"You once thought it was worth the winning, however."

"Jeer at me if you choose. It is the knowledge of that old-time madness that makes my curse doubly deep. But I have run you down at last, as I swore I would; and now one of us two must die. Kill me if you can, for I swear the world shall not hold us both living."

Her face worked with passion. For once the cool, self-possessed girl was beside herself, driven so by her seeming impotency to act.

Captain Iron-Arm, on the contrary, was as cold as an iceberg.

"Ah, so you say. You have a miserable temper, and I made a narrow escape. For various reasons we may need you, though the time for that will be very brief. After that, if you are ever heard from it will be through some inattention to detail that, so far we have never been guilty of. Come. There will be no mistake."

Then he turned sternly to his lieutenant:

"For you, Bad Ben, see to it that that other girl is recaptured and the devil disguised as a grizzly is slain. They can never pass below and somewhere you will find them. Do it if it takes a day."

The girl stared at him while he spoke, an expression of doubt settling upon her features, but as she would have spoken he wheeled and strode away while two of the outlaws forced her along the path toward the retreat.

CHAPTER XIX.

MAGIC MIKE HOLDS THE AGE.

"HALT there!"

The command rang out, clear and firm, and Bad Ben and his men looked warily around, with ready weapons.

Lame Luke had obtained a longer start than they had believed, and it was as much by chance as by skill that the outlaws had come upon him just as he had swung himself by a rope over the side of a great crevice, which seemed to be the beginning or head of a canyon or deep gulch.

They had sighted the fugitive before he disappeared; and on his arm he still carried Aurora.

How hard she had struggled to escape they did not know; but they saw that she was quiet enough now, and thought that if she had not fainted she might be seriously harmed.

Not one man in five thousand could have lowered himself down the rope as securely and steadily as did Liver, though he could not altogether understand why they had hesitated to fire at him.

But the outlaws had no intention of risking the life of Aurora, and did not doubt that they had him at a disadvantage.

"Ketch hold of ther rope, an' draw 'em up!" shouted Bad Ben, who was a little in the rear of the rest.

"Ef yer does I'll let go an' drop!"

Lame Luke, as the hands touched the cord, shouted back the threat, and the bandit was staggered.

Yet there was another chance.

The moonbeams sifted straight down into the canyon. It might be death to the girl to interfere before the two reached the bottom; but after that Liver would make a reasonably safe mark. Two of the men, under cover of the revolvers of the rest, stood ready to slide down the cord the moment Lame Luke quit it. His death and Aurora's recapture seemed certain.

And just at this crisis, when Liver was half-way down, the stern order rung out.

The outlaws looked around in surprise, if not in absolute terror. The invisible stranger evidently expected to be obeyed.

Obeyed he was, so far as immediate pursuit went, for the men at the rope lost sight of Liver for the moment and were as much interested as the rest in finding out who this might be.

Bad Ben was a cool ruffian, as well as a desperate one. He noted their hesitation.

"Don't yer let 'em git away from yer. Fol' 'em up. It's only one galoot somwhar's, hid erway. Ef he shows hisself I'll plug him. Down with yer, an' git ther gal."

"I wouldn't advise it," responded the voice.

"I can just get away with the whole territory of Arizona if its population tries to go down that rope; and the first man that tries to draw on the man-grizzly will taste lead. Your game is blocked right here."

"An' who be you? Ef yer sich a good man jest show yerself. Hyar I be, shoot at me an' see how quick ther boyees will fire at ther blaze. Yer dealin' with men now."

It required courage of no small amount to thus defy the hidden challenge, for Bad Ben drew himself up like one who actually courted a shot. The fact was he was willing to risk one if he could concentrate all the stranger's attention to himself.

"Ha, ha! Don't let them try it. I'm watch-ing them, and I tell you I'm a bad man to shoot. Magic Mike they call me, from the way I plant them; and I always shoot through the brain. Isn't that enough; or must I refer you to Funny Fred for an account of the work I do when I go on the war-path?"

"Funny Fred be hanged! We don't know no sich person, hyar. But we does know you; an' you kin blow a good deal better than you kin shoot."

Bad Ben hoped that his words might have the effect of causing the hidden man to show himself, but he had already located the voice, and knew that the speaker lay hidden on the other side of the gulch. If he was as cautious as he was brave there was no doubt but that he could command the situation, without any particular danger to himself.

Perhaps, however, he might be tempted to come out.

"A couple of you, lean over an' drop that cuss in ther kenyon. I'll make it so durned hot fur this galoot that he doesn't show his head."

The men had fallen back from the edge of the precipitous rock; but at this order the two who had already been marked out for the duty threw themselves down at full length and crawled cautiously toward the line of the ledge. At the same time Bad Ben drew two revolvers and began a rapid fire at the crevice in which he thought Magic Mike was located.

Three or four shots he had made, without any apparent effect, and then, just as one of the men who had been seeking to draw a bead on Lame Luke was ready to pull trigger, a bullet came crashing back, breaking squarely through the center of his crown.

The other started hastily back and the fugitive below at that instant disappeared with his burden. For the present he had evaded danger.

"Foller him up. He can't get away. Ef we rustle 'round we're bound ter head him off yit."

"Not much, my friends," retorted Magic Mike.

"I've been corralled here for about half a day, and I've had a fine chance to study the lay of the land. Hold hard, ther! Pass that point if you can. I've got you now, sure, and if you've half an eye you ought to see it. Take water, man—eat sand. If you've got some other way, go along down—I reckon the crazy cuss will get, all the start he wants meantime—but if you want to frolic 'round me I'll swear you can't catch him."

Marshall was about right.

To follow the canyon required the road-agents to pass for some little distance along a narrow ledge, that hung against a mass of rock which, just then, towered upward. But one man could pass at a time, and the unseen marksman had a much better opportunity to hold this pathway than he had to command the ledge on which they were standing.

The fact seemed to be that there he could only cover the men who had leaned over the edge to follow Lame Luke; otherwise Bad Ben would scarcely have escaped.

"Tbar's no use er torkin', Ben—he has us. We've got ter gi'n up, one er ther t'other, an' do it durn quick. I ain't hog ernus ter try sart'in death, an' I don't jest reckon ther rest ov ther boyees are wild ernus either. Hyar's pore Dan deader ner nails, an' tbar'll be a giner'l windin' up er this gang ef yer tries it on. He's jest got ther dead medicine on us. We'll go fur him ef yer say so, er we'll go round an' head 'em off. But we don't waltz along ther ter sart'in death."

A chorus of grunts voiced assent to the statement of the spokesman, while another added:

"I'll bet yer ther durned cuss ain't alone. Ef he could git ther drop on us that bad, we'd better be peelin' our eyeballs afore they take ther hull outfit up above inter ther camp."

Bad Ben saw the force of this. He called his men further into the background, and hastily formed his plans.

Two men were left to watch here, one was sent back to convey the intelligence to the captain, while he and the rest were to make an effort to head off Lame Luke.

The two men who knew so much of the hitherto impenetrable intricacies of their retreat must be silenced, and Aurora recaptured at all hazards.

It only required a moment to make these arrangements, and as the two sentinels took their station to watch that Magic Mike did not escape from what was a prison for him, if it was also a menace to them, they heard again his mocking voice:

"Oh, just keep ther thing moving. Bring on a young army when daylight comes. I'm bere to stay, and I'll give you the liveliest shake-up you ever heard tell of. When I draw I fill, and

don't you forget it. You can't get me out of here inside of a week."

"You are ther ter stay. Jest try ter kin out el yer dar! Watch him, boyees. When he moves ye'll hev a chance, an' throw him cold. Ef he don't move, we've got him sure."

Bad Ben believed that, too, and as he hurried away he was certain that, with their post of vantage, it would be impossible for Marshall to escape.

He would have thought differently if he could have seen what happened during the brief portion of time they had been off of their guard.

Mike Marshall had during the day worked himself up from the cul-de-sac in which Lame Luke had left him, leaving Old Eph behind; but he had found that he had bettered himself but little by the change. He had had some slight hope of being able to find an outlet eventually and one thing was certain. Whatever of the labyrinth he explored became firmly fixed in his memory.

The appearance of Luke Liver had been as much a surprise to him as to the outlaws, but when he noted the burden that he carried he was willing to risk everything in his defense, and had covered his retreat in the most effective way.

When Bad Ben drew back Marshall saw his chance.

Noiselessly but rapidly he came out from his hiding-place in the niche, and descended the rocks over which he had toiled but a short time before.

He had no fear that his foes would again come forward sufficiently to look over the ledge, when the exit from the little cavity could be more safely guarded from a more distant standpoint; and unless they did, it might be long before they discovered his absence.

Yet he cast his voice backward—an old trick of his trade—and it was not strange that the deceit was completely successful.

Then, as he hurried off down the bed of the canyon, in pursuit of Lame Luke he chuckled to himself as he thought of the outlaw sentinels watching like cats at an empty mouse-hole, and imagined their surprise and anger when the truth came to light.

There was little danger of pursuit, but there was a great deal of fear that Liver had cast himself recklessly into a trap, from which there would be no means of exit, either for himself or the rest.

If, however, Luke knew of a way out, Magic Mike intended to be close behind him when he went, and after that, chance would dictate the proper course for him to pursue.

And, burdened as he was, Lame Luke was being rapidly overtaken.

CHAPTER XX.

SURPRISES ALL AROUND.

LAME LUKE did not wait to discover who was the unexpected friend that had undoubtedly saved him, or how he would come out after he had so boldly challenged Captain Iron Arm and his followers.

Enough for him that there was a check to the pursuit. He knew that or he might have halted.

After a little, however, he heard light but rapid footsteps, following him down the canyon, and looking over his shoulder saw Magic Mike coming after, at a rate that would soon bring him up with him. Indistinct though the figure was he believed that he recognized it, and halted, his hand on the butt of his revolver.

"Well, old man, it was a mighty pretty racket that we worked, and after what I played on them I should think you'd let me go into camp with you, rejoicing. Anyhow I've got you on the level now, and if I don't get away from here you can bet I won't stay alone. Sabbe?"

Marshall spoke with a reckless ease; but behind that he had nerve that had been tested and not found wanting. Even Lame Luke seemed to recognize that.

"It ain't my circus, ez yer ort ter know. I kin trust yer till we git this yer lump o' sweetness back ter Wa'nut Bar. Arter that yer look out fur yerself. I won't say what's ter happen. Mebbe you kin tell him, Atty."

He had placed Aurora upon the ground, and she stood quivering, but silent.

"Speak up, leetle gal. Lame Luke's behind yer every time. He's double-barreled lightnin' on ther shute, ez I know, but I ain't afear'd ov him. Sheil be go erlong, er sheil we plant him right hyar, ez yer bin a-longin' ter do ser long!"

"Tis is no time for folly," answered Aurora in a low tone, and looking keenly from one to the other.

"Let the past take care of itself, for a time at least, until we get out of this valley of death. Just now we are in too deep peril of our lives to think of anything else. If you can lead the way from here, do so. Five minutes lost may be a fatal delay."

"Ef I kin? Heaven bless yer, honey, Lame Luke knows this hyar kedentry all by heart. Kim on."

Aurora did not look at Magic Mike; but Marshall, at the sound of her voice, started and looked keenly at her. When the two turned

away without paying him further attention, he coolly followed close behind.

Liver had shown that he had a wonderful knowledge of this wonderful country, and though Marshall had little doubt but that his brains were somewhat addled, he felt safe in following his guidance, though he had already guessed that it would bring him straight to the mountain-pocket in which Luke had left him immured.

Sure enough, they scrambled down the pathway which it had taken Mike Marshall so much trouble to mount.

Old Eph had remained behind, and was, it seemed, curled up on the very spot where Magic Mike had left him.

He raised himself with a snort, but it was one of satisfaction. He came forward toward Aurora as though he recognized her—then hesitated, and gazed suspiciously at her.

"Come here, Eph," said the girl steadily. "Shake!"

She held out her hand, and the bear, rising upon his hind feet, put his paw upon it.

"Thank you, Ephraim, I've nothing to say," said Marshall, as the brute turned its head and stared at him inquiringly. "I've no doubt this is a family reunion, and maybe I'm your long-lost brother, with a strawberry mark on my arm; but I'm a bashful man, and don't want to be bothered. You set your affections on the rest and I'll watch out for the road-agents as they put their heads over the ledge up yonder. Maybe we ain't in as bad a trap as it seems—if we ain't I shall really smile. Ah!"

Lame Luke had solved the mystery of the *cul-de-sac*.

He had gone directly to the spot where Eph had been lying, and pushed aside a rock that covered an entrance to the passage which had lain concealed beyond.

Here was the way to flank Captain Iron-Arm, if, as Marshall judged, it was unknown to him and his gang. Without hesitation he followed into the narrow crevice, and the stone rolled into place behind them.

Just in time were they; for hardly had they vanished when above them Bad Ben's head appeared, as he stared vainly down into the pocket.

No sign of living creature was to be seen, and he growled:

"Cusses on 'em, they can't bev got out; they must bev hid themselves under some ov ther boulders. Ef we can't stir 'em up ter-night we'll be mighty apt ter make it lively fur 'em in ther mornin'. Watch out, now, an' see that er flea don't skip past."

They might watch a very long while without seeing any signs of the fugitives.

Lame Luke had lighted a torch, and led the way through an underground passage, finally emerging into the bed of another canyon.

Then came a silent, toilsome tramp. Once or twice Marshall attempted to start conversation, but the girl turned away. Lame Luke raised his hand, and Old Eph uttered a warning growl. The young man was not afraid, in spite of it all; but he thought the rest were very unsociable, and so trudged quietly along, tolerably well satisfied that he had been able to make his escape from the dangers into which he had so rashly thrust himself.

Outside of the toil there was nothing to complain of. Liver led, and no one was standing in the way.

When Walnut Bar was in sight they halted, and then Lame Luke having thrown off his disguise and rolled it into a bundle, turned to Marshall:

"We're 'bout ter ther eend ov this tramp, an' don't reckon we wants ter go inter camp together. Yer kin tell lady-bird what yer tole me, an' see what she makes outen it. Ef it 'mounts ter anythin', I shu'd guess it won't make things any wuss; an' ef it don't, things are 'bout ez desp'rit ez they'll git anyhow. Listen ter him, leetle one; I'll say fur him, ez pard ter pard, atween him an' me, he war squar' ez they make 'em; an' I think he meant ter be squar' with you. Ef not, why not? An' ef yer does hate him, thar's no reason why yer shouldn't h'ar what he sez fur yer good. Mebbe thar's bin a mistake."

The two young people stared straight at each other, and the girl's eyes began to gleam.

"This man has done too much harm to me and mine for me to care to listen to him," said Aurora, at length.

"Bless my soul," exclaimed Marshall, in some surprise.

"You're piling it on a little too thick. I've got a good memory anyhow, and I'm pretty sure that I would never have forgotten you; the fact is, I never saw you before to-night."

"You infernal liar!" began Lame Luke, the words breaking out like the first spiteful shots from a skirmish line; but Aurora laid her hand on his arm.

"That is only one more point added to the list. But if you had seen me before, what is it that you would have said?"

Magic Mike appeared to be puzzled by Aurora's words.

"Hanged if I see what you're driving at. I'll give you the story in brief. Luke and I were pards some years ago, but I'd lost sight of

him for a good bit, till I heard that he'd taken a partner in the animal fake. From what was said I made out it was a girl I had some acquaintance with, and I was bent on telling her that her father was dead, and if she opens her hand there's a good-sized fortune ready to drop into it. You're not the young lady I'm after, so I've nothing more to say—though, now that I look closer I'll take back what I said. I have seen you before—I never want to see you again.

"As for Luke himself, he's had a rap on the noddle, and at times he's wild. Look after him a little and if you need help call on me. For the sake of old times you'll find me there. Now—so long. I'm done."

He turned resolutely away and was deaf to their efforts to stop him.

Aurora called him by name, but he shrugged his shoulders and trudged on. Lame Luke, with the excitement of the morning flaring in his face, ordered him to halt and italicized the words by cocking a revolver, but Marshall did not look back.

"Shoot and be hanged! My back is broad enough to make a reasonable sized mark; and I'm done talking anyway."

"What does he mean?" asked Aurora, turning to her companion, in an inquiring way.

"It's him ez hez tuk water. He's lost his sand. I never 'specte ter see it; but you kin walk right over him. Ther eend are drawin' in."

"But don't yer think no more ov him ter-night. He'll kick. Thar's Wa'nut Bar. Fust I'll leave you ter Johnny Goodman's; an' then I'll rout 'em out at ther Best Chance. It ain't fur off'n daybreak, an' it's time you wer' sleepin'. Eph's gittin' res'less; an' he's gittin' too big ter fool with. Ef he didn't care fur you he'd be a scorcher. I ain't axed yer fur yer story, but in ther mornin' yer kin give it to me."

"But, in the morning what do you propose to do?"

"That's your cirkiss. Ef yer don't want no more ter do with Mike say so, an' we'll git back whar road-agents ain't quite so thick."

"No, no! We will carry it to the end. It was only that I wanted to know what you would advise."

"Tell yer, I ain't advisin'. Spread yer lay-out an' I'll cap fur yer game. Hyar we be."

Lame Luke spoke doggedly, and there was no doubt but that he meant what he said.

He had his reasons, too; and it was just as well that it was in front of Johnny Goodman's he was standing, instead of in the canyon before the secret passageway had been reached. While he was beating a tattoo on the door his hand suddenly ceased its work, his arm became rigid, and slowly, and without a word, he sunk to the ground.

After all, the wound on his head had been no love tap. The fraction of an inch by which he had escaped instant death was very small, and the danger was not over yet.

Fortunately Goodman himself awoke, and came to the call. When he opened the door he was surprised to see the group just outside. Lame Luke was stretched motionless, with Aurora holding his head in her lap, while Old Eph sat watching over the two in a philosophical sort of way that was ludicrous indeed.

"Bless my soul, what's all this? I'll swear I believe it's this bear girl come back. See hyer, don't let that young elephant come this way. Say! keep him out!"

In some trepidation Goodman slammed the door shut. Eph had risen, and looked as though he intended to make some investigations.

"The brute is harmless. The man may be dying. Open up and take him in, whatever it may cost."

"That wasn't part of the bargain. Him an' ther b'ars war ter stay at Pison Pete's. Ef you'll take ther critter over thar an' put him in ther cellar with ther rest ov ther carryvan I'll see ter ther man, fur I ain't no snide; but I ain't goin' ter be chawed by no grizzly."

"Send some one along, then, that is not afraid. I'll be safe going, but I'm not so sure about coming back."

She heard several voices within and the door reopened cautiously.

"Yer sure it's safe?"

Goodman had serious doubts.

"Safe enough; and while you are shivering there a good man is dying here."

She spoke sharply; and as Johnny Goodman was no coward her words cut like blows from a whip. He came out and toward her, and at the same time Senator Storm stepped past him.

"Come, my dear, I will show you the way to the Best Chance. Call up your animal and let us get him out of harm's way."

"Follow me, Eph," she said for answer, snapping her finger as Lame Luke had done, and the well-trained brute followed lazily, while Liver was carried in.

A dozen yards the trio went before Storm, halting suddenly, exclaimed:

"Sanctified lightning! It is Aurora after all! What does it mean?"

CHAPTER XXI.

TOMBSTONE TOM STRIKES AN OLD PARD.

TOMBSTONE TOM was surprised to meet the man he could have sworn he had left just out-

side the camp; but he did not show it. He gave a grin and a wink, and passed on to the bar.

There was a rough-appearing character standing there, who looked up as Tombstone Tom edged in alongside of him.

"Pon me soul ter glory but I b'l'eve it's me ole side pard, Tom Burke," was his salutation, after a second look that was prolonged into a stare. "About ther fust man I've struck in this dog-blasted hole, as I ever knewed afore. Shake."

"Lightnin' blast me if it ain't Alligator Abe, ther man from Crockerdile farm. Put it thar, pard; put it thar. How long yer bin byer?"

"Since las' night, pard. I kin in on ther hearse ez war held up by Iron-Arm."

"Sho! Hyar, barkeep', set 'em up! Thar ain't much ch'ice—it's all whisk—an' mighty bad whisk'et that."

"Good enough, sich ez it is. I war jist goin' ter histe in 'bout four fingers flooid p'izen—hyar's ter yer, pard, an' ef yer hev no objec', hyar's to ther boss ov Snorter's Gulch. It'd bin er cold day ef I hadn't met him."

"Snorter's Gulch!" said Tombstone Tom, with a start. "Wby, pard, that's a thunderin' big hole in ther ground, an' no rocks ter show fur it. I heerd Billy war bu'sted fur good, an' ther wa'n't no man with sand ernuf ter tackle it."

"It's a healthy ole bu'st. Snorter hez found ther man ov rocks, an' twixt you an' me, I reckon he kin down hyar express ter git inter ther racket. I orter know, fur he kin in on ther cold-meat wagon—it war ther indervid' ez bed his darter yanked away by ther road-agents. He's in a peck er trouble, but it don't make him furgit bizness."

The two men were seemingly old acquaintances, and fraternized at once. Having tasted Poison Pete's whisky, they moved back together to a bench in one corner, and Tombstone Tom showed considerable interest in the Snorter Gulch, and its new partner, proprietor, or whatever he might turn out to be.

"Oh, Senator Storm's a solid man, an don't you furgit it," responded Abe, in explanation. "He's hed bad luck all 'round, an' some ov ther boys kinder don't count on him, 'cause he lost his pile when he struck the prince ov short keyards, but that wa'n't nothin'. He'll bev stamps by ther cartload when ther time comes, an' he's jist been flyin' 'round this hyar burg tryin' ter git up er gang ter clean out ther agents ef he can't do no better, tho' he sez he'd sooner pay ther twenty thousand than run any risks ov gittin' his darter, an' ther young galoot ez hev took in erlong with her inter wuss danger. Them ez j'ines his gang hez ther ground floor at ther Snorter, fur work, ov w'ich I are one."

"Good wages, eh? Wonder what's ther chance fur a man er my size gittin' in too?"

"Bully, I'll bet. Storm war hyar a minnit ergo. Let's go see him."

"That's my name. You'll interdoose me, will yer? I'm kinder back'ard blowin' me own bazo."

"I'm right behind yer, pard. Yer needn't be afraid ov him. He's ther looniest man ter tork to yer ever set eyes on."

"I ain't no doubt; but mebbe he won't cotton ter me jest so strong, ez I warn't in ther racket with ther agents."

"That don't matter. I tell yer it's men he's wantin', an' I kin tell him ye'r a man frum ther ground up."

Probably Burke might have mentioned a thing or two that would have spoken this belief, but he kept his own counsel. As Storm had left shortly after he had come in, their quest was vain.

"Never mind, I kin see him in ther mornin', fur I'm dead sot on comin' in. But what sorta gang hez he got? I'd like ter know ez I war goin' ter hev good pards. It's lonesum' workin' a hole in ther ground when ther rest ain't ther right stripe."

"I seen half er dozen ov 'em an' they look like ther kind ter spend ther'r money free, though they mou't break down when it comes ter hard work. Thar's a couple now—kinder new men like myself. Jest struck ther place this week—an' see how they're wrangin' in."

If Burke was after information he had certainly struck a bonanza in the person of Alligator Abe. That worthy had got near enough to the point of saturation to part freely with any knowledge that he had, and Tombstone Tom worked him for all he was worth. To most persons that might not have been very much; but Burke had, or thought he had, an inside view of things; and was able to read between the lines. The two conversed confidentially together for nearly an hour. Then Alligator Abe rose unsteadily to his feet.

"Won't yer kin erlong, pard?" he mumbled, his voice tbick from his frequent and deep potations. "I've found er bully lay-out, an' there's room fur one more. It's er shanty at ther edge o' camp an' ther ain't much but roof an' floor; but that's all yer want."

"Don't keer if I do. I'm fearful tired, an' jest er yearnin' ter bunk in."

It was entirely upon the spur of the moment that Tombstone Tom consented; but Alligator

Abe looked as though he needed a friend to stand by him until he was safely deposited in bed, and Burke was not the man to forsake him.

They reached the spot without interruption, and Abe tumbled right down into his blanket, almost immediately falling into a heavy slumber.

Burke, who had been watching, arose and looked cautiously around. He had too many irons in the fire, and had run against too many people in his time, not to be on his guard. If he was to be surprised he wanted to know, at least, from what direction he was to look for danger.

The shanty did not seem much to look at, but it would do well enough for a shelter during the dry season. As Tombstone Tom was accustomed to roughing it he mentally decided that if he found, in the morning, that there was a chance to occupy these lodgings free, he would make or help to make some changes, and establish his head-quarters there.

Having taken in all that he could, and arranged for a possible surprise, he crawled behind the snoring Abe, closed his eyes and went to sleep.

He must have had one eye at least half open, or, light sleeper as he was, he could not have heard the cautious footsteps outside, an hour or two later.

In an instant he was awake, and had executed a retreat that he had already planned. One of the boards in the floor was loose, and he had arranged it so that in case of disturbance he could raise it and drop through to the ground beneath the cabin. There was quite a space under the floor.

Not an instant too soon was he, for the lurkers outside had entered, and he could hear them quietly moving across the floor.

He could also hear Alligator Abe snoring with the power of a steam saw-mill. In fact Alligator Abe made more noise than a thousand such as the intruders would have done. If Burke had not been watching and listening he would scarcely have noticed their presence. As it was he could manage to track their course from the time they passed through the doorway until they halted just where Abe was lying.

Then he saw a few lines of light come shooting through the cracks in the floor.

The party above was making investigations.

The light appeared and disappeared several times. There was a low exclamation of disappointment, and a little whispering.

"They must er wanted some 'un else, an' I'll jest bet ther fust letter on his name war me. No catchee, no habbe; I'll have ter find out some-ways who ther cusses be ez are so all-powerful anxious arter me health. Mebbe they'll kin ag'in when I are a-sleepin'. I'll git er squint, anyhow. They seem ter be movin'."

As Tombstone Tom sollicquized to himself, he heard the tip-toe footsteps softly retreating, and he set out to crawl quietly toward the front of the building, from which he hoped to have an unobserved peep, though he had to run the risk of their taking a look under the floor of the shanty.

It was dark under there and the place was uncomfortably shallow for moving about in, but the vagabond was in earnest, and he made rapid progress.

As he went along, however, he touched something, and the touch gave him a thrill from his heel clear up to his eyebrows.

The something was a boot, and though he could see nothing, he knew as well as if he had been told that there was a foot inside of the boot, and a leg attached to the foot.

Tombstone Tom did not betray himself, however, nor did he allow himself to be diverted from his purpose.

If there was another man under the floor, the chances were three to one that he was in hiding like himself, and would keep quiet until the party outside had disappeared.

That would be time enough to investigate; so Burke crawled on without giving the least sign that he had made any discovery.

Three 'ren stood a yard or two away from the cabin, their heads close together.

"We're throwed, sure ez a gun. That chap has dropped in and scared him off—if he was here, which I ain't so sure of. I don't believe it's any use to watch. The whole thing is a fish yarn. We may ez well skip. This don't seem to be our night, anyway."

"Mebbe it war a ghost arter all," interposed a second, in a hoarse whisper. "You-'uns, ez is so blazin' hot ter laff at what yer don't see, kin make er durned big mistake sometimes. I don't take er back seat fur anything livin' but I don't hanker fur ketchin' on ter ther dead. Let's git."

"Confound your cowardly soul; what are you afraid of? They call this place the 'Haunted Cabin,' but I'll bet there's never anything nearer a ghost than that whisky-soaked rough that's sleeping in there now. Good thing for him we struck a light when we did. The only question with me is, what's become of the other man? It may have been a mistake, but I told you I'd give you a hundred dollars apiece if you found

his corpse lying around here, and the offer holds if you find it anywhere else. I've an idea, though, that he just slipped in here to hide temporarily, and that he went on to his shanty when the coast was clear. You, Bob, can watch and see that no one goes in or comes out, and we will drum around the camp and see what we can take in. If you get over yonder by the bowlder you can see without being seen. I suppose you are too cowardly to watch inside."

CHAPTER XXII.

A DEAD MAN SAYS HIS SAY.

TOMBSTONE TOM held his breath until his eyes bulged.

No wonder.

He was more than interested. Although he could not see the speaker, whose voice was also disguised by the whisper, Burke could almost swear it was Senator Storm that was so interested in some unknown man, whose appearance in the neighborhood had been taken for that of a ghost.

The three moved off, however, Burke listening eagerly to the sound of their retreating footsteps, which gradually died away.

As the men got beyond range of hearing, Burke gave a sigh of relief; and, though his lips did not move, he said to himself:

"It ain't me they're arter, anyhow; but I'll bet rocks it's the man behind. I must get a squint at him, fur it'll be apt ter show up Storm's leetle game. I'll crawl 'round to ther back side ov ther house an' try to inveigle him out."

Tombstone Tom had a commendable regard for his own safety, though, when there was no escape, he was willing to fight even the most desperate odds.

It was more than likely that the other man under the house, would be willing to allow him to befriend him; but then, if it should turn out that he wouldn't, Burke wanted to be ready to seize the advantage if necessary; and to do that in their present contracted quarters, the chances were all the other way.

As he moved, a slight rustling seemed to show that the unknown was doing likewise. Having the start, Burke was able to be out first. Then he whispered sharply:

"See hyar, pard, ef you know what's good fur yer, you'll come out an' talk this thing up. They're after you, hot; an' ef any man needs a friend, it's a seller 'bout your size. Eh?"

"Dry up, there; I'm coming," was the cautious but impatient answer.

Slowly and with some effort the stranger backed out and rose to a sitting position.

"And now, who the thunder be you? I'm Tombstone Tom, ther bad man from Bitter Creek, an' I'm out lookin' fur blood an' ha'r."

"I should jndge you were a desperate man from the way you shout," answered the other, dryly. "You needn't be alarmed, if that's as loud as you can howl. As for me, I'm a dead man; and the first letter of my name is Chess Barker."

"Put it thar, pard, put it thar!"

Tombstone Tom hastily clapped Barker on the shoulder with one hand, while he held out to him the other; "I've beerd ov yer, an' I know all yer friends. Dead! Yer right. Yer' dead ez a door nail, with er bullet plum through ther nozzle; an' what's egsercisin' ther camp whar ye'r buried. I tol' em of they'd give me time I'd git ther jangle on a string. Whar yer bin, an' what's ther racket?"

"Oh, you talk too much with your mouth. I've been lying low; mighty good thing I was, too. While I wasn't able to take care of myself they were after me, and they meant it. He's my meat when I get strong enough to crook my finger and pull a trigger."

"Who's that?"

Burke spoke encouragingly, and without showing any wonderful amount of curiosity.

"Never you mind. I'm not giving him away. Just you remember I haven't a word to say against anybody. I'm peddling my own claims, and I wouldn't wonder if it was about time to toot my horn."

"Dog-gone my tail-feather, allee saamee, ef I warn't on ther right track this mornin', when I mounted Senator Storm. Eh?"

"You dry up on that. I'm not giving you taffy, nor anything else. Help me back to my shanty and keep your clam-shells shut and I'll make it all right with you. I'll be ready for work in the morning, and I'll bet you'll see ther fur fly. I'm tired of this dodgirg."

"But see hyar. Couldn't you keep er leetle clos't fur a day er so yet? Yer may ez well give me my chance fur my white alley."

"Oh, I ain't in a hurry to begin. I've got a contract, I know that; but it won't do to wait, or they'll take me in. If it wasn't for that, I tell you, I'd—I'd—"

Words failed the genial gambler when he sought to convey the idea of what he would do under certain other circumstances. From his tone, in spite of its weakness, it was plain that he was inclined to be vicious.

Mr. Burke was cautious, a .41 recognized danger in the distance.

"See hyar, ef yer knows what's good, you'll crawl back till mornin'. They're layin' fur yer an' yer can't git away 'thout bein' seen. If they see yer—down goes yer meetin'-house; they mean it sure."

"I'll take my chances. The sooner they begin the better I'll like it. I can hold as straight and kill as far as any other man. If you're afraid crawl in out of the night air, but I'm going."

Barker's mind was made up. It seemed as though some sudden change had been effected. Without another word he stepped awry.

"Oh, I ain't afraid, an' I'll go along an' see yer through, but I tell yer, ye miss a chance fur rocks when yer don't take me in."

Tombstone Tom ranged up to Barker's side, and the two passed from the shadow of the house into the open moonlight.

Contrary to their expectations, they were not molested.

Barker kept his eyes open and his mouth closed until he reached his shanty.

Then he suddenly turned on his companion.

"That's all right. I'm here now, and I've got no further use for you. May Heaven forgive me for making any use at all of such a disreputable old fraud. If I hear of your trying to mix in my affairs or letting your tongue rattle on what you've seen to-night, I'll shoot you dead the next time I meet you. Gabbe!" Now, you gigt!"

Chess Barker wheeled and disappeared inside of his cabin without waiting to hear what answer, if any, might be given.

Burke was too much taken aback to have a word ready. He stared at the door that had closed in his face, scratched his head, and then went toward Poison Pete's, considering in his mind the rank ingratitude of men in general, and the small value he got out of the specimens he had picked up that evening.

"I kin work ef I hev to," he muttered to himself, "an' ez things stan' I don't see anything cl'ar except ter git er job et ther gu'ch. Ef there's a chance ter git seemin'-ways in with ther gang it'll hev ter he did. Then, pull devil, pull baker. We'll see how we stan' when ther fun's over."

While he was considering this phase of the question, a boy tapped him on the arm and asked in a sharp, squeaking voice:

"Mister, be you Tombstone Tom—the man that called at Goodman's to see Simon Storm?"

"You've hit the size ov it prezackly. What's wanted?"

"Jest foller me, then. There's a woman in ther case, an' she wants a perivate intervoo. Spect it's likely she's jest fell in love with that han'sum mug o' yours, an' wants ter tell yer 'bout yer mash."

"Duz she look ez tho' thar war stamps in her hand? That's ther question. I wouldn't walk frum hyar to Ther Office ter see Queen Victory herself, ef she didn't purpose ter ante up subbin'. han'sum. I tell yer, my time's wurh money."

Burke spoke in rather a low tone, and looked cautiously around. He might have a great deal to say, but he was too old a sinner to allow himself to be inveigled into a trap unless the bait was an extra tempting one.

"Stamps! Well, now you just smile. Them's her best hold, fur I swear she ain't much fur looks. Don't hold back now; she must be tired a-waitin' a-ready."

Tombstone Tom made up his mind with alarming suddenness.

"Lead on, youngster. When ther she-male sex beckons, this hyar crittur gits' up an' dusts. Sorrier er sickness, death er destruction, whenever bit ov caliker wants a solid man ter tie to, it's Tombstone Tom they send fur. I'm with yer—frolic ahead, an' I'll foller ez tho' thar warn't no sign ov er 'greement 'twixt you an' me."

The boy did not object to this arrangement.

"I'm paid fur ther job whether you come er don't; an' I'm a-goin'. Do as yer choose."

He wheeled with his nose in the air, and walked away as though he had no further concern in the matter.

It would not have surprised Burke if he had seen what was intended for an ambuscade at the corner of the next building. He was keeping a very sharp lookout and following the boy at a respectable distance; nor did his vigilance abate when he discovered that he was being led toward the rear of Goodman's Hotel.

"Ef they kin shoot me outer a winder, they're a smarter gang than I take 'em ter be; an' ef they try it ag'in in ther open, I kin hold a natural an' ther rest trumps, ez usual."

The boy stopped before any sign of danger had appeared.

"Here yer be," he said, and then sprung behind an outbuilding.

Burke was almost within arm's length when the youngster vanished, but he made no effort to detain or pursue him; on the contrary, he dropped hastily to the ground, as if expecting an immediate shot.

He was altogether mistaken. As he crouched there he heard a slight rustle of feminine garments, and then the lady appeared on the spot from which the boy had disappeared.

"You came, did you?" she asked, in a sharp

whisper very much resembling that of the boy.

To the intense surprise of Purke, the lady who had applied for an interview was none other than Miss Lavinia Storm!

CHAPTER XXIII.

MISS LAVINIA BEGINS TO SUSPECT.

"In course I come; but ef you'll excuse me fur bein' so brash—what in thunder der yer want ov me! I don't know yer frum Adam—er his sister."

"Maybe not," said Miss Lavinia, answering quite at her ease. "But you know something that I want more knowledge about; and I have need of just such a man as you seem to be."

"Er minnit, pard. What sort of cuss be that?"

"A lazy, drunken, worthless vagabond, anxious to make all that can be made without actual, hard work; for sale to the highest bidder, and who will lie for the sake of lying when there is no other inducement."

"All down but nine. You've got it fine. That's me to a dot, an' every time. Heaven bless yer, madam, ther ain't er man livin' ez knows me better. Now then fur one more leetle question, an' then you kin propel. Hev yer got ther rocks ter pay a man ov that style? Ef yer hain't, shut yer clam-shells an' sherry yer nibs. Ther ain't no use ter waste time."

No possible compliment could have put him into a better humor, if he could be judged by his manner, though he showed some anxiety about what would be the answer to his question.

"If a reasonable amount of money will buy your service and your silence I ought to be able to satisfy you. Here. Take this as an earnest of what I will do for you."

"Thankee, marm; but that ain't ther way ter git ther most outen Tombstone Tom. I've got er leetle failin'; an' ez yer seem ter be tryin' ter treat me very squar' I'll expound. When I've got purty nigh ez much ez I think kin be got outen er person I sell out in er lump ter ther other side. Don't gi'n me no money till it's earned, but peromise me heaps an' you'll find me whar yer want me. That ther warnin'; now drive on."

The woman hesitated; but seemed to think it was a Hobson's choice. After a little she began:

"This morning I heard your interview with my brother, and there were several things about it that, in the first place, I would like to have explained. For instance: That man—Barker I believe was his name. Have you any evidence that my brother killed him as you charged?"

"Not er partickle," responded Burke, boldly. "Fact are I couldn't hev, ez ther man ain't dead. That war jest part ov ther game."

"And bad you no reason for making such an outrageous charge, except the desperate desire to blackmail a man you thought might be able to satisfy your itch for plunder?"

"Not a durn thing."

Tombstone Tom was starting in to reel off a string of stuff with his usual brazenly impudent air; but suddenly he halted and cast a keen glance at the woman.

"See hyar, marm, show up yer hand ef yer want ter get an eenterest in ther pot. Mebbe it'll give me away, an' maybe it won't; but I want ter ax yer soberly, be you an' him in 'er same boat? Methinks it strikes me ez how, mebbe, arter all yer ain't."

"How can I tell? That is what I want to know. You seem the lowest of the low, yet you have made me the most wretched of women by your words. I have heard them, all day. Sometimes I think he may be a villain after all. And if so, what is she? Oh, it makes me sick to think of it."

"An' ef he shu'd be sick whatcher goin' ter do 'bout it?"

"Dol! That I cannot yet tell. Protect myself first of all. Perhaps, after that, do justice. Oh, if I only knew!"

"Good. I'll show my hand firs', an' then call for yourn. Ef Chess Barker ain't a stiff it ain't Simon Storm's fault, fur I'll sw'ar he it war ther plugged him. Ef Barker'd speak it wouldn't be hard ter prove; but he's dumb ez a clam. He'll act fast and talk arterwards; an' what I'm afear'd on are ther he'll rake in ther Honorable Simon afore I hev er chance fur my white alley. Now what does yer want?"

"A moment yet. I could not catch all, or even the greater part, of what you said to him in regard to the road-agents who stopped us on the way hither. I doubt him, I tell you. That young man that was with us on the journey was immensely rich. Was Simon Storm his friend or his foe? That is one thing I want you to find out. Follow him, watch him: let me know who he sees, and what he says. If I find him false, you will be the greater gainer."

Burke chuckled softly.

"Money ter watch Simon Storm. That's it. I didn't think yer knew how ter shout so prezinctly. I'm with yer."

"Yes; follow him day and night until you learn who and what he is."

"But don't it strike y'r that's purty strng

talk fur a woman about her brother? Mebbe ef I found out whatcher want ter know, you'd flop over on t'other side an' bowl."

"Is he my brother?" responded she, with startling energy. "Before Heaven, I never doubted it until to-day. Now I want proof, and am afraid to ask him."

"That's kinder queer," said Burke thoughtfully. "Mebbe tber's a point er two in this hyar ez ar' wuth hearin'. Ef you'd expound, I've got er clear head an' mebbe I c'u'd gi'n yer somethin' ter think erbout. Ef I hed a brother, you kin gamble on it I'd know who he war 'thout askin' Tombstone Tom. 'Bout how long hev yer knowned him?"

It was a shrewd question, though what Miss Lavinia had just said had naturally led to it.

"If I had not thought you were such a man, would I have taken the risk of meeting you here to-night? Listen: I may have known him thirty years or more; I may never have seen him up to six months ago."

"Whew!" said the man, in a disbelieving way.

"Listen to a brief outline, that may tell you also why it is that I want him spied upon.

"Thirty years ago or more, there were only two of us, brother and sister. We were taken by different parties to raise when our parents died. A few years after, the family with whom I was living came West. I was to them like an only child, and though they were plain, everyday sort of people, I loved them as much as though they had actually been my parents.

"They were successful, too. John Leonard was a hard-working man, prudent and saving. He struck it rich, and if he had lived, he would have been a millionaire. He died, though, before he had fairly developed his find, and left everything to his wife. They robbed her, but they did not ruin her. She sold out her interest in the mines for a very good sum, though nothing like what it was worth, and then she left it all to me."

"Kinder strikes me I'll git mighty dry afore yer gits through this yarn. Couldn't you wait a bit till I go 'round ther corner for a drink? I don't want ter lose ther famly hist'ry, but I can't stand here so long 'tween drinks."

The conversation was taking a direction in which Tombstone Tom seemed to have no interest. Such a discouraging interruption might well have checked Miss Lavinia, but the very thought of those who had been so kind to her in the past had a warming effect; as she spoke, she was very different from the commonplace, timorous woman of the stage-coach. Besides, all this had a bearing on the uses to which she wished to put the man of much pretension. She went on steadily, and without any show of anger at the interruption.

"You will have time enough to drink after I have paid you for serving me. I must finish my story now, while I have the opportunity.

"For all these years I had heard nothing of my brother. It was only by chance that I saw the name of Simon Storm, as elected, on the People's Ticket, to the Legislature.

"I wro'e to him, asking if it could be that he was my brother.

"He answered the letter in person, and I had no doubt that I had found my only near living relative.

"He professed to be wealthy—I believe he is. He brought his daughter to see me and my heart warmed to the motherless girl. When they went away to look after his mining interests I was desolate. When they returned I was rejoiced. I was foolish enough to come along with them on this journey—and I had intended to invest in some mining property here."

"You have heard what happened along the road, and what has occurred since we came here. I begin to suspect something—I know not what. I heard you this morning and I know you are a bold man. I can pay you enough to make you a safe man to trust. I will give you almost any price to prove to me who Simon Storm and his daughter really are."

"There. You have my story, such as it is. Can you help me?"

"In course I kin. I kin lay 'round an' pick up jest cart-loads ov inf'rmati'on ef ther stamps keep comin' in. I'll tell yer ther best hold. There's a bally boy ez us't ter be a side-pard ov mine, ez hez got in at ther Snorter Gulch. I'll git him ter ring me in too; an' what we can't find out won't be w'u'th much. I'll tell yer what I think, though; an' I won't charge er cent fur doin' ov it. Ef yer hev made yer will, leavin' ov yer boodle to Storm er his darter, jest you burn it up an' make another, leavin' it somewhat else. Then you tell 'em ov it."

"But you don't think they'd hurt me?" began Miss Lavinia. The talk about wills had an instantaneous effect.

"Hit it ther fust time," chuckled the vagabond. "So yer hev made a will. Well, ther advies stan's alleee samee. This are a durned onhealhy kedentry fur only one woman ter stand atween a man an' half er million."

"But how did you know the figure of my fortune?"

"Never you mind. Jest you keep that ther

advice in mind. Bu'st yer will an' hev a leetle pile ready when I bring in ther news. It's time this hyar couclave split. I reckon Storm's been watchin' us fur half an hour. Whar'll I see yer ag'in?"

"Here. Find some means to let me know when you have any information, and I will come and receive it. From here I can see the moment there is a light in his room. When he comes in, if not sooner, I must get back."

"Put it thar, pard. I'm in with yer, an' I'll hev a job at Snorter Gulch to-morrer, er know ther reason why."

He held out his hand to ratify the bargain.

Miss Lavinia hesitated; then allowed the tips of her fingers to drop into the broad, dirty palm that was extended.

Then she withdrew her hand and hurried away.

Tombstone Tom did not attempt to follow her. He had made one or two interruptions; but he was really listening with close attention.

For perhaps a minute he stood there, thoughtful and silent. Miss Lavinia had just about had time to reach the rear entrance to Goodman's.

Then Burke heard a smothered sound, that might, or might not be a cry.

Instantly he rushed forward, and turned at the corner of the outbuilding.

Before he had time to see if Miss Lavinia was still in sight a man raised from the ground where he had been crouching and struck straight forward.

Tombstone Tom was caught napping. The attack was so sudden and vicious that he went down at the first blow. He lay sprawled out and as senseless as a log.

Then four men, all of them strangers to Walnut Bar, came forward, and raising his motionless form, coolly carried it away on their shoulders. His chances for work in the Snorter Gulch were very slender indeed. In fact, during the following day the Bar was engaged in discussing the meaning of his disappearance. It was almost as interesting a subject as the new state of affairs at Snorter's Gulch.

CHAPTER XXIV.

WITHOUT THE MASK.

The surprise of Senator Storm was not at all simulated. Up to the moment he spoke he had believed that it was Alta with whom he was walking. At his words she laughed; a short, hard, dry laugh.

"Yes, it is; but there is no need to blazon the fact. I saw the chance to come and I could not resist taking it. I wanted to see how you were getting along. I was afraid if you had no one at your elbow to urge you on you would forget that you had a daughter and a friend whose life hung on your raising twenty thousand dollars within a limited period."

"Don't be foolish. Why did you desert Wilde?"

"Partly because I could not help myself; and more because I saw the chance of the season. Make no mistake, I am no longer Aurora; I am Alta; and the heiress to the million of John Melcher."

"It will not work," said Storm, suddenly, and sharply.

"It will. Even you yourself were deceived for the moment. Had I so chosen the mystification would have lasted longer."

"Until your aunt Lavinia's gimlet eyes rested on your lovely countenance. She is one of the straightforward fools that can neither be bribed nor scared into silence. She would know you in an instant—and all the world too."

"Such people are not apt to live out their days; but there is no need for her to see me for the present. I shall do very well without her; even if, when I do come back to stay, I find that she has completely disappeared."

There was both mockery and suggestiveness in her tone; but Storm caught first at another idea.

"Come back to stay? I believe you are crazy. Do you think you can come and go like this, without there being plenty of fools to suspect that somewhere or somehow there is something wrong? Better would it have been had you stayed away; but now that you are here you must remain."

"In what character, pray?"

That was a puzzling question, that Storm did not at once, answer. While he remained silent, considering, Aurora uttered an exclamation of anger.

"What is it?"

"Eph. He was my credential: the living witness of my identity. He has taken himself off, and I doubt if we have the skill to lure him back again."

Sure enough, in the few moments that the two had spent in conversation the bear had managed to abscond. He was nowhere in sight or hearing.

"Never mind, it is all for the better. The brute was dangerous, and you can tell now whether it is not best to drop all hopes of succeeding to the Melchor fortune."

"What! When chance has as it were, thrown it into my hands!"

"To win it you must lose two others. What

will you be to Lavinia Storm if she once knows you as John Melchor's daughter instead of mine? And would you give up Harvey Wilde?"

"For the first I do not care; but for the second, no. Why should it? He is mine, won at the cost of time and danger. A name to him is nothing; it is I that he will want. The heiress with half a million in her hand is better than the possible heiress of Simon Storm's failures and bad debts."

"What nonsense is this? At first you were but too glad to imagine the chance to pillage him; now you talk as though you wanted him to rob you. Are you such a fool?"

"Fool or not Harvey Wilde must be mine. If you bleed him of twenty thousand I cannot complain. It is the price I must pay. But if you dare to try to harm him you will find me standing in the road."

"Heavens and earth! Here is Saul among the prophets. What do you mean with such nonsense? No one wants to harm him. The fact is, we'll treat him so tenderly that he will call us his bosom friends. But all the same if I don't help spend a good part of his fortune you needn't call me Simon Storm again. Have done. Come into Goodman's as yourself, let me tell your story, and, to-morrow, or next day, I will communicate with Wharton, get the notes drawn up and signed, and have him in here. I can use him now, and our game must be made now if it is ever to be."

"Our game! Yours, you mean. Why have you interfered with the real Alta? Why is she a prisoner in the mountain? I know you hate her, and wish her harm—but why? You mean to strike—is it to be through me?"

"Never mind that part of the story. I swear to you that I had no hand in her spiriting away. You have seen her?"

"Yes; in Wharton's hands. That is another reason why I must go back. She must never return here—never be seen again by those who would recognize her."

"Leave that to me. I see how it is, and it is the last thing that I expected. That you should lose you head like a bread-and-butter school miss passes my comprehension. Henceforth I will have no faith in any one; least of all in a woman."

"And what have I done that is so strange? Perdition seize you, Simon Storm! Do you think I have no heart?"

She flamed up in sudden heat, and turned on him with the fury of a tigress—pausing for a moment, though, in silence, as if crouching for a spring.

Mr. Storm was a cool, quiet man when not suddenly excited; and he made no answer. Indeed, in the darkness the girl could imagine that she saw a smile of scorn curling around his lips. In the light of what she had thus said it was no wonder.

"Speak, man. Do you think I care for dollars—or for lead and steel either? I am playing in earnest and for myself the part you gave me to study. What have you got to say about it?"

"It! Oh, nothing. I am a man of respectability, that can have nothing to do with the disreputable undertaking you hint at. If there are others who may call you to account, and grind you to pieces in the reckoning, the more's the pity."

"Others! Bah! The others I can wind about my finger."

"Especially Wharton."

"When I pulled trigger a few days ago I thought I held very straight for Wilse Wharton's heart. Perhaps the *soi-disant* Iron-Arm suspected something of the kind might happen, and put another in the place he was supposed to be. Next time—"

Her voice dropped lower and grew colder and harder.

"Next time there will be no mistake."

"Enough of this," said Storm, roughly. "You have said sufficient to show your hand; now it is time for me to show something of the strength of mine. I no longer ask—I order you. You have heard me speak of the Melchor fortune; but it is not for you. We have enough on hand without it—now. A year—two years from this will be time enough. Come with me. I will take you to Goodman's as the returned prodigal, and to-morrow, when you know—"

"That Senator Storm has schemed for himself and that my share is dog's wages for dog's work, I may go mad and die if I choose. Ha, ha! Good-night, Simon Storm, I am going back to Harvey Wilde. Betray me if you dare."

As she spoke she sprung away.

"Stop, stop!" he cried, but she was fleet of foot and in deadly earnest. She vanished without further sound. The night hid her, and Simon Storm was left alone.

He searched for some little time, and cautiously called her by name once or twice. Then he saw that he must, for the time, remain baffled.

"I must go back and tell a story nearer to the truth than I am in the habit of giving. It is useless to hunt for her, since she will double on me like a rake. One way or another Wharton will get his share. Why if anything should

happen to her; but a willful woman generally comes to grief. Yet the scheme was a good one, when we thought it out. At any rate she will not be here to complicate matters; and I have cards that will bring money if I can play them for all they are worth. As for this Liver, he might be worth stamps to me if I can use him now. What he knows I will find out."

The reappearance of Storm, unaccompanied by the girl was hardly noticed, but it was not the part of the senator to let it pass in that way. He went straight to Goodman.

"The girl is as crazy as they make them. She told me a rigmarole story, begged me to see the man was taken care of—as I will—and then whistled to her bear and skipped. Ough! I wouldn't again run the chances I have done for all the gold I'll take out of Snorter's Gulch in a year."

"If you're goin' to look after him of course it's all right; but I'll swear I don't want him very bad. It's bad luck ter have a corpse in the house, an' if he ain't one he's all fixed but the dyin'. Just go in an' look at him for yerself."

Lame Luke looked, indeed, as though he was almost dead; and yet Simon Storm, standing alone by his bedside, eyed him with the air of one who yet expected to make his profit. There was no pity on his hard, cold face; but only eager inquiry. He evidently had not given up all hope of the Melchor fortune, and was willing to wring information even from the dying.

CHAPTER XXV.

ROCKY SAM DON'T KNOW WHAT HURT HIM.

"YER understand that yer played yer hotel an' ther fourth keyard loses. Thar ain't no more show now till ther boyees sees ther color ov yer money. I'm sorry fur ther sake ov ther calico; but I'm mighty glad they don't suspect. I wouldn't run ther chance ag'in fur sev'r'l times a thousan' dollars. That's all off now, an' if ye'r white ye'll never let on ez to ther truth ov ther game ez war set up. Thar war sum bad work up thar, an' ez I remarked afore, ef you shu'd try ter do it I'd be obleeged ter plug yer afore ther yarn war finished."

Harvey Wilde was being guided back along the narrow roadway toward his old quarter, and his attendant was Rocky Sam, who thus renewed the threat he had already made.

Not altogether a bad-hearted man did he seem, and Wilde thought he had measured him correctly, as a weak, good-natured sort of a villain, with certain instincts of bull-dog courage and faithfulness, who might nevertheless be still further tempted.

Thinking this the young man tried to speak.

"Don't think I would ever betray you; but, look you, this is your one big chance. I begin to see that it is going to cost me not less than ten thousand to get out of this. I rather like you anyhow; why should you not make the whole of it? If I am good for ten thousand to the gang, why not to you? What say you?"

"None o' that, stranger. Can't yer see that ef ye'r a rat in a trap, so is ther rest ov us? Ef I wanted ter go meself I couldn't git out; how yer think I'd git you through ther rifle without mashin' ther bark off! Dry up on that an' sherry along."

Rocky Sam spoke sharply to end the matter, and his hand touched his revolver significantly. Wilde thought he had suddenly grown wicked. If the prisoner had thought of making a struggle the chance was lost. With a sigh of regret he raised one foot for a step—and then set it down again.

Something unexpected—something terrible occurred.

There was the sharp sound of a smart fillup, and then Rocky Sam suddenly rose bodily into the air. He only gave one gurgle that was cut short too suddenly for a groan.

While Harvey Wilde looked upward in thorough amazement he heard a sharp, low whisper:

"Hist thar, stranger! Keep yer head cool an' see ef we can't come ter terms."

Wilde was certainly cool enough. It did not strike him that any one who attacked Rocky Sam could be other than a friend; and he had already settled in his mind what it was that had happened.

Some one—and the voice seemed slightly familiar—was perched on the rocks above, and having deftly lassoed the outlaw, was drawing him up, probably with the aid of companions. It did not seem likely that only one man would be able to do the work.

"Finish your work and then tell me what to do," answered Wilde. "You'll find me reasonable all around."

The work was done with dispatch, for the outlaw was hauled up, and disappeared before he had time to know what had happened to him. Then the lasso dropped downward directly in front of the young man.

"Ketch on!" said the same cautious whisper. "We'll have yer up hyar in ther jerk ov a lamb's tail; an' don't yer take ter puttin' on any airs when yer git hyar. It wouldn't take much ter roust out a peck ov trouble—an' trouble ain't what we an' my pard's after."

Wilde did not ask any questions, or wait to discuss what the man above might be after. He "caught on" at once, and without delay by thrusting his head and shoulders into the dangling noose, at the same time exclaiming:

"If you want me you'll have to pull me up, for my hands are tied as tight as ropes can do it."

Without answering the men above began hauling on the lariat.

A tumble would have been an awkward thing, since beyond the ledge there was an unknown depth, but he cheerfully took the risk and the ascent of twenty or thirty feet was made with only a few trifling scratches and bruises.

Rocky Sam was out of the way of doing any harm, for he lay motionless and securely bound, and the moment Wilde's head neared the top one of the men reached over the brink and seized him by the collar.

"Thar ye be, an' ef yer don't give 'em ther grand shake now it'll be yer own fault. I tell yer I knowed I'd make er strike when I crawled off'n ther ole hearse, an' I've did it. Say, Cap, yer know me, don't yer?"

Wilde grasped the heavy hand that had just loosened the cords which bound him.

"Your voice and face are both familiar; and if I am not mistaken you are one of my late fellow-travelers. I wondered if no one would try to help us."

"Right you are. Poncho Pete is my handle, an' I'm a good man ter tie to. I've jest bin layin' out fur you ever since—an' hyar's ther fust hand played, an' me an' my pard held all ther trumps."

"Trumps you are, and if you see me out of this it will be money in your pockets. But remember, I don't desert the young lady."

"Who's goin' to? It war jest luck ez I kim across Yankee Jim, hyar, but when I see'd him I sez: gentlemen, the balls is set an' ther game made. Hyar's a better strike than the richest pay gravel at ther Bar. Ef we don't hev 'em both out Poncho Pete are a liar. An' ther job's half did a'ready. Next thing are ter git back an' breathe flesh. It won't be long afore some one'll come nosin' 'round ter see whar we've went to, an' it won't do fur 'em ter find us hyar."

"But, Aurora—the young lady?"

"Don't worry. We'll cut, an' come ag'in. I want ter git this galoot whar he won't make no show ef he gits his wind back ag'in; an' I wants ter hev a little talk about ther inn'ardness ov things down thar, ez you've see'd 'em. Foller us an' we'll make yer happy."

It did not require a more pressing invitation to induce Wilde to assent.

Poncho Pete and Mountain Jim caught up the still senseless outlaw and led the way up a narrow but not very difficult pathway, that soon took them quite a little distance from the spot where the strange rescue had occurred.

"Now then, let's hear yer story," said Pete, as they halted. "And say it short. I dropped off'n ther ole meat wagon an' took to the hills when they toted yer away. It struck me mighty solid that if I could bring yer through sires you'd be willin' ter give a big share ov ther twenty thousand ther agents are looking fur to ther man ez brought yer through. I heppened ter drop on Jim, who's an old pard; an' we set our beads ter work ther racket together. There's big money hyar, lyin' round loose, an' we're ther boyees ter corral it. Now tip us yer yarn."

Without hesitation, though in a brief way, Wilde told everything that had happened, down to the time of his recapture and start to return to the cave.

"You seem to know this mountainous region as though it was an often-read book," he added. "Cannot you lead the way to the spot where Miss Storm has taken refuge? If the law has not yet been recaptured we may be able to save her."

"Don't crowd ther game jest now," interposed Mountain Jim, speaking for almost the first time. "She ain't on the same level by a big sight, an' we couldn't get at her from hyar ef we tried. But we kin leave this snoczer hyar, an' git whar we kin hev right smart chance ter see er hear what's goin' on. In course, ef we must, we'll chip in, but it won't be so easy ez yer think; this hyar are a singular sort ov a climate, which it takes a old hand like Pete er me ter understand."

The two men were very deliberate, but after having seen that Rocky Sam, who had by this time fully recovered his senses, was so securely bound and gagged that he could neither give an alarm nor get away, and having turned over his weapons to Wilde, Mountain Jim led the way.

"I say, thar won't be no wonderin' where ye'r got to. They'll think yer both went over inter ther kenyon below, whar they can't look fur yer 'fore to-morrer mornin'. But they won't find us. Not much. I'm ther Dodger from Dodgerville. They hev Poncho Pete an' his pard ter deal with."

It was dangerous work moving about among the rocks, and it was toilsome and slow. They did, indeed, hear faint sounds in the distance.

but could not clearly understand what was going on. By the time they reached a spot where they could see a little and hear more, the strange drama, at the point where the bridge spanned the mountain gash, was about over, Aurora had been rescued in spite of herself, and Alta had departed on her way to the cave above. No wonder that Harvey Wilde did not dream of the substitution that had been made, but imagined that the woman with whom he had been enamored, and with whom he had made his escape had been taken back to the fastness in which they had been lately confined.

"It's too late ter do anything now, boyees," said Poncho Pete, regretfully. "But when we find out how ther land lays an' take er fresh start, we'll jest snatch 'em bald-headed. I'm in fur my share ov ther snoozin' now, an', Jim, you kin wake me when my turn comes."

Without further consideration of the comfort of the captive Sam, Poncho Pete threw himself back, and Wilde, though anxious enough to be at some active work, was forced to wait. Before he well knew that slumber was near it had overtaken him. In spite of the danger both men slept soundly.

When Wilde awoke it was after daybreak, and looking around he could see that it was a wild place, where it would be a chance if any other mortals should come.

Looking downward through the one opening in the rocks, he caught, below him, a glimmer of water and pointed it out.

"I see," said Mountain Jim. "When yer git ther rights of it it'll be twic't ez interestin'. I ain't been scoutin' round hyar fur nothin', an' I wouldn't wonder ef ther drink 'll kin in handy yet. Eh, Pete?"

"It'll work both ways, Jim," answered the other. "When we cut loose look out fur a howl."

CHAPTER XXVI.

A WOMAN AT BAY.

HARVEY WILDE could not get over a nervous fear that the outlaws—who, he doubted not, were searching closely for him—would find their place of concealment, the merits of which he did not altogether appreciate. Moreover, he felt as though it was cowardly for him to be in hiding, when he should be working for the companion he had left behind. He could not disguise from himself the fact that the beauty of Aurora and her bravery, had produced an effect upon him such as the charms of no other woman had ever done; and as he was entirely his own master he did not care to fight against it.

His present companions, however, took the situation coolly enough for three. Poncho Pete has already been summarily described. Mountain Jim was like unto him. From their conversation they seemed in no hurry to come into close contact with Iron-Arm and his men; and not very much afraid of them if such a result became a necessity.

Hours elapsed and still no movement was made that indicated anything like a desire to work. Poncho Pete lounged about, looking downward now and then through the only visible road to the outside world, and Mountain Jim crept silently away, to observe the outlaws and to look after the prisoner, who had been left behind in an apparently reckless way.

Wilde would have been glad to go along—in fact begged to do so. It seemed to him that Rocky Sam was not of such a cast-iron nature as not to be open to inducements and that if he could get speech with him under the altered circumstances some valuable information might be elicited.

"Don't worry yerself 'bout Rocky Sam. I'm able fur him, an' ther less yer sees about him ther better. He's doin' well wbar he is, an' he'll hev ter stay thar till we git ready ter slide out, then mebbe we kin take him along, but he's one ov them kind ez would be er blamed sight better dead than alive."

"But suppose anything should happen to us that we could not get back to him! He would have to lie there and starve."

"That's about the size ov it," answered Mountain Jim quite coolly. "Ef anything happens to us, though, I don't guess it will be our fault, er that we'd any sooner it'd come 'count ov him. Not much. I'll feed him up, gi'n him a drink, an' be back ag'in with er sack-full of news. While I'm gone you kin pump Pete about ther chances."

Mountain Jim went away, and Wilde did not find Pete very communicative.

"Don't be in er splutter, youngster. You kin try yer hand alone if these quarters don't suit. We kin blindfold yer, take yer out, an' turn yer adrift. Mebbe yer knows more ner yer uncle Ezra, an' mebbe yer don't. Ef ye'll take advice ye'll stay right hyar, though. When Jim comes back and things settle down p'raps we'll make a try ter help that bloom'in' female; but I wouldn't be surprised ef she'd turn out in no hurry ter leave her quarters. Fur pure, unadulterated, cross-grain, back-action obstinacy yer kin back a mule ag'in ther world—an' lose every time."

Wilde was a little angry and a good deal disgusted. He had little more to say after that until Mountain Jim returned; and that was not

for some time. When he did come he brought encouragement if not much news.

"Thar's three ov us, well heeled; an' thar's a dozen ov Iron-Arm's men. They're boys ez shoot fur keeps every time, an' ther more men ther ar' fur breakfast ther better they like it. All er same, ef we hed a wheen ov good luck, we might hold our own if we tried ter shook 'em up, an' I bin peekin' round an' thinkin'. Ef yer both sez so, we'll try 'em a fly anyhow. Mebbe there's suthin' in it—mebbe not. We'll find that out afore we git through."

"Fix it ter suit yerselves. Poncho Pete's hyar on ther make. Ef our friend'll promise ter ante up, he kin count me in ez fur ez you say it's safe ter go, an' the money calls fur."

"Ther ain't nothin' safe—ef yer want that yer hed better take ther next stage fer Frisco. Ef it's fun yer want, ther chances are 'way up. Now, it's Mister Wilde's chance ter talk; an' ef he names a figger that's wuth ther risk, I'll lead yer inter ther racket, an' stay ez long ez ther next man. If I ain't mistook now's our chance. Some on 'em are away on ther scout—ef they don't git back."

"See here," answered Wilde, "I understand that you two are on the make, and you needn't be so anxious about impressing it on my mind. I have money enough to be able to stand the expenses, and I've been telling you to name your own terms. See us both out of this safely, and I promise you the twenty thousand sure, whether Storm puts up his share or not."

"Put it thar, pard. That's solid, an' ef we don't get you both out it'll be because ther gal won't come. I've been watchin' yer party close, an' I think I kin trust yer nerve, though it ain't every greenhorn I'd go in with. Ten thousand apiece are big money, and it's wuth while ter try fur ther chances anyhow. Brace up now; we'll sail in."

It took some time to arrange their plans; for everything had to be done with the utmost caution. In this seamed and gasbed land of bidding-places and pitfalls, although Mountain Jim was almost certain that the outlaws had not found their trail, there was no telling where they might be lurking to watch and waylay.

The plan for the campaign was simple enough. Mountain Jim proposed that they should reach the pathway below at the spot where Wilde had been spirited away. It was midway between the sentinel at the bridge and the sentinel at the cave; and concealed from both. According to his observation, Iron-Arm and the majority of his men were absent, probably in search of Wilde and Rocky Sam, and there was a chance to strike into the recesses of the retreat. It might cost a life or two on both sides; but success meant everything.

"And in case we break their grip and release Aurora—what then? Can you lead us out through the canyons?"

The thought of the possibility of success made Wilde once more cautious.

"Better than you er they think. We kin git out at ther back door; an' you kin bet yer bottom dollar it won't be ter Walnut Bar I'll take yer; but beyond ther divide ter Glory Gulch. Ef we git our erlive, there'll be no peace till somebody's dead. We'd know too much ter live."

It was very true that danger did not cease when he had made his escape from the neighborhood of the retreat; but Wilde was not troubled about that. If the present evil could be overcome, he would be able to provide for the future. He followed his guides with steady courage.

Night had come down, but with it moonlight. Once more the lariat that had done such good service was fastened to a projecting rock, and then the loose end lowered, and Poncho Pete dropped downward, followed closely by Wilde.

"Hist!" said Pete, suddenly, as Mountain Jim balanced himself over the edge above.

The warning was so low that it was scarcely heard, but it was accompanied by a warning wave of the hand.

The three listened eagerly, and they heard, faintly, voices on the trail below and beyond.

"Suthin's bu'sted," whispered Pete. "Thar's yer woman now."

It seemed possible. Though the words could not be distinguished the tones appeared to be those of a feminine voice.

"Thar's a new deal in course, an' a change in the game. Stay hyar, an' I'll see what's ther lay-out."

Poncho Pete glided away without waiting for an answer, and scarcely noted that Wilde, with hand on revolver, followed after, as noiseless as himself.

Mountain Jim, who had slid quietly down the rode, stretched out his hand to detain Wilde, but was too late.

When the two had gone some little distance they reached a jutting angle of the rock.

Here Poncho Pete stretched himself at full length upon the trail, a movement that was immediately imitated by the young man.

When they had crawled forward a few paces the words became distinctly audible, and the speakers stood revealed, just below them.

The outlaw leader, Iron-Arm, and Aurora Storm stood facing each other, just at the spot

on which they had stood the night before, when their conference had been so suddenly and strangely interrupted.

Iron-Arm was speaking now, and his voice was at a higher and angrier pitch than was usual with him. He had lost his cool, sneering manner, and his words rolled out with a fire and fervor that was new and strange to Wilde.

What did it all mean?

"And you have the courage," he was saying, "to come back and tell me this. By heavens! I wonder I don't kill you where you stand."

His hand swung around to his hip—if he had drawn he would have been a dead man. Wilde had his own weapon leveled. That he did not fire was a wonder. Perhaps it was because he shrank, even yet, from killing his first man.

CHAPTER XXVII.

WILDE LEARNS THE TRUTH AT LAST—A SUDDEN RETREAT AND ANOTHER RESCUE.

THE listeners waited for Aurora's answer; and it came as full of hot scorn as it could well be.

"You wonder? I thought you knew me too thoroughly for such nonsense. You do not wonder at all, because you know that I know that at your very first movement looking like war, I would drop you dead. Who is there living that can draw a weapon while I am pulling a trigger? From the moment your eyes rested on me I have had you covered."

She shook her hand, and there was a little glitter and glimmer, as the rays of light fell on the polished barrel of the revolver she kept warily pointed at him.

"Perhaps it might be as you say, but I would die trying were it any one else. You know that fear of death has never yet held me back half a second—it never will. But I swear to you I cannot yet believe you in earnest."

"What! Not when you remember how Carter dropped? That shot was intended for you. You suspected something though, and like a coward you put him where death was going; he would feel the first stroke. No, Wilson Wharton, Chester Arnold, or whatever your name may be, you have chosen to question me once more—I tell you it will be the last time. If you cannot swear to me that it shall be the last, there will be war between us. Be sure that either I go my own way—or one of us dies!"

"And your way is toward this young man, whose brains are in his pocket; the fool that you brought here as a pigeon for our plucking. By—"

"Hold! You need neither swear vengeance nor attempt to frighten me. For what purpose he was brought here need make no difference to you. You will receive your wages for your work, and there the matter ends. I doubted you none too soon, and it was wise that I would not wait. I have come for him. I will trust him to you no longer. Plan another farce—some other way for his escape—and plan it quickly. He goes from here to-night."

"But I have told you—"

"Lies. You have hidden him away. Bring him forth."

"Of all bold women you are the boldest. Who else would dare to come here, even with a cocked revolver in each hand, and an army at her back? You count too far on my forbearance."

"Or your own danger," sneered the girl.

"No. That has nothing at all to do with it. You know that if you lift your hand against me you can never get away from this place alive. I have but to give the signal, as it is, and you go down. I think, though, I can manage one woman—and that woman my wife!"

Aurora gave a step or two forward.

"Your wife!"

She ground the words out between her tightly clinched teeth, and they sounded like a savage growl.

"Don't dare to repeat those words again! I am free as the air. Least of all am I tied to you."

"I am not so sure of that. You may have gone so far as to have secured a trumped-up decree of divorce, and yet not be as free as you imagine. And all the courts in Christendom cannot abolish the fact that we were married."

"Why tell me this?" asked the woman, more coolly, but with the steely glitter brightening in her eye.

"Cannot you guess? Because I find that I love you still. When I first met you after those years of separation, I'll admit I was most concerned to know whether your anger had been softened. I deserted you once, I admit. What else could I do? Then, as I saw you again and again, my love came back! In addition I saw that you were in a way to be fairly prosperous; and I felt that I had a right to expect to share in that prosperity. Are you surprised? You know that you are the handsomest woman I ever met. With a chance for beauty and booty, what more could you expect from a man like me? Storm is a good man, and a rising one, but he must know very little about you! I dropped into his plans; but if it had not been for you I would have seen him hanged first. I

would not have given away the secrets of these hills for a beggarly ten thousand. I did not guess the other part of the scheme at first—thick head that I was. I have carried out my part, however, and will to the end. Then—I will know that you have given him up, or he dies."

Poncho Pete felt a firm grip on his shoulder, and looking around saw that Harvey Wilde had taken it all in.

The young man was pale and resolute. He made a motion that meant "withdraw."

Poncho Pete smiled and shook his head. In his hand he held his revolver, which pointed toward the two. If Aurora stepped a little aside Captain Iron-Arm would be in line, and it was not hard to guess what Pete intended to do. If a fight had to come, what better way was there to open it than by bringing down the leader of the gang?"

But Poncho Pete reckoned without taking Wilde into account.

There was no chance to discuss the pro's and con's; but there was a line of argument nevertheless. As Pete coolly turned again for the balance of the play, he felt a hard steel tube press against the base of his brain, and heard the reckless whisper:

"Back, or I fire!"

Four words were better than forty. There was no mistaking the earnest meaning in the threat. Poncho Pete may have expected some such revelation, but he had not anticipated the effect. Inwardly raging he threw up his hand at once, and pushed back from sight of Iron-Arm and the woman.

"Come," whispered Wilde, never relaxing the grip of his fingers, and in silence they retreated to where a whisper would be inaudible to the wranglers.

Then Poncho Pete turned on the young man in scarcely repressed fury.

"Cuss yer fur a soft-headed fool. What yer goin' ter do now? Then war ther chance ter take ther ranch an' corral ther shekels. D'yer think I'm only browsin' 'round hyar to look arter a woman that's ez bad ez ther wu'st? D'ye think she ain't wuth the price yer offered fur her! Mebbe she ain't, but I've took ther chances, an' ef ye'r a white man I'll hold yer to yer bargain. Dog blast yer pictur's. I war playin' ther game fur all that was in it, an' you bu'sted my hand. Thar's a reward on Iron-Arm, dead or alive."

Poncho Pete's anger was rising, and in another moment he would have thrown caution to the winds. An interruption came; and from the direction whence least expected.

Up above them sounded a hoarse shout of triumph, followed instantly by the sound of a single shot, and a little later by the horrible thud of a terrible fall.

Almost immediately they heard shouts in their rear; and satisfied that Captain Iron-Arm had been joined by a detachment of his men, Wilde and Poncho Pete dashed forward just as they heard Mountain Jim exclaim:

"I saved him, but, by thunder, the rope's gone!"

There was no time to lose in asking what had happened—and none needed.

Before them, on the narrow trail, in a crumpled, lifeless heap lay the body of Rocky Sam. He had worked loose from the cords which had tied him, and had come to the spot where the three let themselves down over the wall of rock.

He had drawn up the cord so silently as not to attract the attention of Mountain Jim; but inadvertently he had leaned over to look below.

It would have been better for him if he had kept a safe distance from the brink and given an alarm.

The bullet from Mountain Jim's pistol had struck him squarely in the forehead. He had risen to his feet with a spring, turned once and a half around, and then fallen.

"Ther ho'nets are out thicker than we thunk!" exclaimed Pete. "What's ther dodge; sou't er flunk?"

"Flunk, in course. Foller me. Did yer make er point?"

"Nary point. Stick by us, youngster. Ye'r a fool, but we'll see yer through."

Retreat by the way in which they had come was impossible, and the time for fight against overwhelming odds had not yet arrived. The three darted away, following the trail that led upward. Behind them came Iron-Arm and his men, whose return had been so unexpected.

A guard lurked at the very spot where the night before Wilde had met the unfortunate Sam.

He had heard a shot and shouts, and was craning his neck forward at the time the fugitives came into sight.

He hardly knew what to expect, while Harvey Wilde did. His eyes sought the spot where the sentinel was standing and then he fired.

Wilde was not a perfect shot, but the bullet came uncomfortably close, and the outlaw ducked his head just as he pulled his own trigger.

The slight movement made his bullet fly wide of its mark.

Then Poncho Pete tried his hand, with better effect. At the flash and report the man went down, just as a girl rushed out from the cleft in the rocky wall.

It was Alta.

No one recognized her. Her disappearance from Walnut Bar was of course an unknown matter to the three, and at first sight they supposed her to belong to the band of road-agents. Mountain Jim's wrist was even turning toward her, and Wilde, who, cooler now than he had been for an hour, just knocked his hand up in time, exclaiming:

"Slow and steady, therel it's a woman!"

"Help!" cried Alta, holding out her hands as she rushed forward. "I am a prisoner here and—"

The sentence was not finished. Poncho Pete, aiming past her, fired at the man who came behind her in pursuit.

"This way," shouted Mountain Jim. "Lively now. If we can get a start on them I'll see you through ther ripple yet."

Wilde held out his hand, that was caught by Alta, and the four flew along the trail, that soon pitched downward toward a long, narrow gulch below.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE DEATH-TRAP IS SPRUNG.

WE'RE in ther trap now, an' don't yer furgit it."

The four had flown as though they had borrowed wings, and so far as any sounds went, they seemed to have completely distanced pursuit.

As Mountain Jim spoke, he halted and looked around.

"If we are in a trap, we had better not wait until it is sprung," said Wilde, uneasily. "It does look, so far as one can see in the darkness, as though the hand of man had been at work here. What is the nature of the trouble you expect to meet?"

"I dunno ez I expect ter meet any trouble. I kinder reckon if it works at all, it'll work ther other way. But I don't wanter do it ef I kin help. Thar's a good many holes to a skimmer, an' I figger on gittin' out by one that they ain't fly to. They think they hev us corraled, but ther man ez posted me 'erabout this hyar region hez forgot more than this Iron-Arm recomembars."

"But what is the nature of this trap?"

"Yander's ther trigger. I shu'd s'pose ther idear are ter let ther gerloots ez are behind git purty tol'r'ble clost up, an' then knock erway ther props. Yer seen ther water from erbove ter-day, but yer didn't sabbe what it meant. Ef er man war ter strike inter ther hills off'n ther Wa'nut Bar trail, he'd nat'rally git lost among ther keynons; but ef he hed er leetle help, he'd come right erlong up ther gulch. Ef thar war a crowd, they could stand 'em off from hyar until they was all purty well bunched. Then let ther water out, an—good-by, John!"

The explanation of Poncho Pete was readily understood, and Wilde shuddered as he looked upward at the frowning breastwork that held back the intermural lake.

A wooden sluiceway led partially through the breast of the dam. Evidently the trap was well planned.

When the flood-gates were opened, the rush of the water would demolish the rest, and sweep everything before it.

Alta looked upward, but she did not shudder.

"We may have to use it ourselves. How does it work? When they attack us, it will be the part of you men to hold them at bay. As for me, when the time comes I can strike as hard a blow as any of you. Oh, I tell you there is nothing that nerves the arm like the hate that comes from wrongs."

To Harvey Wilde this girl was an enigma. He had neither seen nor heard of her before, and her name gave him no information.

Poncho Pete and his friend, on the contrary, seemed to recognize her at once, though they had never before spoken with her. Her words gave them some uneasiness.

"You're mistooked; indeed you are," said Mountain Jim, soothingly. "We kin hold our own without that. It's ther plan ov a bloody murderer, an' I wouldn't hev it on my soul not fur rocks. Yander's our pathway, an' ther ain't no danger but what we kin beat 'em out on it. Kim along. They're only holdin' back ter git all together fur a rush. We ought ter be outen sight when they come."

The brief rest had given them all a needed breathing-spell. Now Mountain Jim led the way up a narrow pathway, that led to the top of the breastwork. Wilde followed next. The work here interested him.

There was something so desperately grand about this infernal contrivance, he could imagine that it was prepared only as a resource in some last grand emergency, when a force that was overwhelming should penetrate into the inner recesses of the outlaw lair. He walked but slowly, and Alta was close behind him with Poncho Pete bringing up the rear.

"Ah!" said Mountain Jim, halting at the water level. "We ain't too soon. Yander they come."

Sure enough, in the gulch below, a dozen men were rushing into sight, with Iron-Arm in the lead.

"Quick!" exclaimed Poncho Pete. "It won't do fur 'em ter see which way we light out!"

"Yes, quick!" answered Alta in a strangely hard voice; and turning suddenly, she dashed down the narrow path, up which she had just toiled, evading the band of Poncho Pete that was thrust out to detain her.

"Fore-sights an' trigger-guards, ther gal's went crazy!"

Mountain Jim watched the flying form without moving. Perhaps he guessed her intention; but before Wilde had fathomed it, there came from below the faint sound of a blow, and a low but ominous crash.

After that was the rush and then the roar of water. The seemingly stanch breastwork dissolved as if by magic, and the lake moved bodily down the narrow canyon. It pushed, it tore, it mangled, and in an instant, so far as they could see, the four fugitives were alone in the canyon.

As Alta came fleetly up to rejoin the others, her face was deathly white. Harvey Wilde heard her mutter one word:

"Avenged!"

For some days the outlaws had suspected that there were men in the hills who knew the recesses even better than themselves. Since the night before, when Aurora had been spirited away, and Rocky Sam and his prisoner had disappeared, they had been searching for the intruders, but had failed to find them. The supposition was that all had found their way out together; and though the return of Aurora, of which they had received intelligence, had been delayed, her coming was no surprise, even though she had penetrated by a way that had unexpectedly enabled her to outflank the sentinels who were watching for her.

It was the coming of Poncho Pete and the rest that had caused the surprised alarm. These men were too dangerous to live; yet they would most likely die hard. The outlaws had a wholesome respect for their probable prowess, and hoping that they were cornered in the gulch into which they had descended, waited a moment or two while gathering for an attack in force.

As far as they knew, the fugitives were in a cul-de-sac, from which there was no way of escape, since the pathway was blocked at the other end.

The moment or two of pause was for bringing together the force, not for consultation. In a mass they charged up the canyon.

Then came the catastrophe. The broken ground impeded their progress, but offered no barrier to the water that came sweeping down in an ever deepening mass. The distance was not great, but strive as they might, the water was the quicker. It reached, it deepened, it overwhelmed. The struggling wretches went sweeping back, dashing against the jagged walls of the chasm, or whirled and tossed in the boiling waters.

Iron-Arm braced himself the moment he noted the coming danger. He was a wonderful athlete, and had learned to swim in the surf in the East, so that he did not lose his presence of mind.

But skill and human strength were nothing. He was wrenched from his feet, flung this way and that, and finally dashed against the side of the canyon.

After that he struggled no more. His senses had left him, and he was whirled along like a straw on the top of the wave.

Yet that blow was a piece of good luck beyond desert, for now he floated straight down to where help was waiting for him.

A man coming up the gulch in the rear of the outlaws had scented the danger from afar, and climbing up beyond the reach of the waters, hung there—for the time being safe, but imprisoned in a narrow niche, the one accessible spot of refuge.

The man was Mike Marshall.

He had as abiding a hate for the outlaws as a man could well have; but as he leaned over and saw the wave strike, he gritted out:

"Fate has taken revenge out of my hands, but I would give a year or two out of my life, if I could save him now, to slay him hereafter. Ah! I can try."

He leaned over still further, his left hand grasping at a rock behind him.

The body of the outlaw whirled around and away; it seemed as though the only chance was gone. Then suddenly an ankle and foot rose out of the water, and Magic Mike gave a clutch, at the same time throwing himself back and bracing his feet against an inequality in the ledge on which he crouched.

The waters wrenched and tugged, but the fingers of steel kept their hold. The strain was over in a moment, since the current swept the body inward and against the canyon wall, pressing there tightly. After that the rest was

easy. Without delay he drew the body up and laid it down on the floor of rock.

Kneeling, Marshall stared down into the white face that gleamed out at him like the face of a corpse, in spite of the darkness of the niche. For the moment it seemed that the man had gone to his last account.

The sight worked no softening in the hard lines around Marshall's mouth.

"Curse him, he has escaped me after all. Lightnings blast you, what have you done with Alta?"

He shook his fist at the marble face, as though by threat or force he would bring back speech to the silent lips and wring intelligence from them.

It was only a momentary madness. Giving a harsh laugh Marshall's hand dropped to his side, and without further investigation, or any thought of attempted resuscitation he turned and looked out again into the canyon.

The avalanche of water had almost passed. It came with tremendous suddenness; but it went on down the sharp declivity, which it would sweep clean of all movable things.

Marshall knew next to nothing of what had caused the flood. He had returned to the canyons to search them once more, and entering by the other route had lost his way and wandered hither.

After a little he clambered down.

From the bottom he looked upward.

The niche held the body hidden. No one could have dreamed what lay there.

"Fitting end, after all. He was too vile a scoundrel for the hand of man, and so fate took him. This time there should be no mistake. Yet he came to life from my bullet! I have half a mind to go back and finish the work beyond doubt."

He looked doubtfully at the spot for a few moments, and then turned away and strolled resolutely up the canyon.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A DRUG IN THE GLASS AND A FRIEND IN NEED.

MISS LAVINIA had kept moodily in her room for the best part of the two days following the evening of her meeting with Tombstone Tom.

For herself, she was none the worse for a scare that she had had on that occasion; and she was unable to decide whether or no anything untoward had happened to her agent. Her suspicions in regard to Senator Storm were at least no weaker. If she did not rise up squarely in resistance it was because she thought she was reasonably safe at Goodman's, and by waiting she might ultimately be better assured.

Of course she knew nothing of Aurora's temporary presence in Walnut Bar; and it was only in a blurred sort of a way that she heard of Lume Luke's return with a cracked skull, and what was most likely to be his last sickness. She asked the senator something about it, but he was far too busy to give a satisfactory answer. He was too deeply interested, rushing along the work at Snorter's Gulch, to pay much attention to her.

His interest in that noted find was the thing that most confirmed her suspicions; yet, if she had known the truth his taking an interest there was not so strange. He had professed that he was entirely out of money, and he might have been for all that his purchase into the mine showed, since he had obtained his interest entirely on credit.

The second evening after her conference with the man from Tombstone Miss Lavinia came gliding toward her room.

There were two modes of entrance, one through the hall, and the other through the door leading from Simon Storm's room to her own.

This evening it seemed to her that there must be some one in her room. It was nothing that she saw or heard, but an undefinable suspicion, that led her to act, at the risk of seeming too ridiculously credulous.

She listened at the door, and was satisfied that she heard footsteps in her room, though when she opened her door hastily and looked in there was no one there.

She was either very shrewd or very suspicious, else she would not have noticed that the tumbler from which she usually drank was not standing on exactly the same spot where she had left it. A cautious examination showed that a little fine powder had been sifted over the bottom of it.

Miss Lavinia was taking a tonic which she generally followed with a swallow of water. Probably this powder was to do a work of some kind; and this was a subtle way of administering it. If she had not been already suspicious she certainly would never have noticed it. Now that she did she was cool enough to act. She poured a very little water into the glass and rinsed it thoroughly. After throwing out the water she wiped it well and then returned it to its place.

Scarcely a minute had elapsed, and if they were to be concealed it was well that her actions had been so rapid. She had barely moved away when there was a tap on the door, and at her bidding Simon Storm entered.

He came ostensibly with information, but Lavinia did not doubt but that his real purpose was observation. She listened to his talk and heard it in a hazy sort of way; but all the time she was thinking.

If this was poison she must either escape soon or die. She could not be constantly on her guard. He would, in one way or another, reach her very soon. If it was only a soporific it would be best to make him believe that she had taken it; and then watch to see for what it was administered.

All this passed through her mind almost instantaneously. Before he had finished speaking Miss Lavinia had made up her mind.

Answering with as good a show of interest as she could assume she prepared her usual draught.

There was a strange glitter in Simon Storm's eyes as he watched her. She could see it; but what might be its meaning she could only guess. With as steady a hand as she could command Miss Lavinia raised the tumbler to her lips and drained its contents.

Storm seemed relieved. Closely as he was watching her he did not notice that she was eying him every whit as eagerly, or the look of satisfaction that must really have shown itself. He did not look like a man who had accomplished a great crime; and for that reason she felt reassured.

As soon as he went out she threw herself upon the bed, her face to the wall, and waited.

"If he tried to give me a drug it was for some reason. He wants me to be so soundly asleep that nothing ordinary can waken me; if I pretend to be under its influence I can certainly see what it is that he has laid out. Probably he will be back by and by. If I can only stand his examination, then I will know the worst. Oh, it is a terrible thing to suspect one that you have believed to be of the same flesh and blood. And Aurora! Is she his victim, or his accomplice? Who can tell?"

This woman, plain in looks and sometimes foolish in her ways, suffered as few would suffer and be still. It may as well be admitted that she was selfish and avaricious; that she had been led by Storm as much through a hope of adding to the wealth she already possessed as by any sisterly affection for the man. Yet she had trusted him, and now, when that trust was broken she did not know which way to turn, since in any direction she might stumble across his tools. She was afraid to remain quiet, fight, or run away.

Some time elapsed before the first movement that she was expecting occurred. Simon Storm again knocked lightly at the door.

Of course Miss Lavinia did not answer.

After a brief pause he turned the handle of the lock and entered red stealthily.

She could not see him; but she heard him as he came across the narrow room, and could imagine that he was bending over and looking down at her long and earnestly.

He went away again as quietly as he had come, and next she heard him lock the door from the other side.

Miss Lavinia was at any rate a prisoner.

She sat up on the bed and looked around, as if she thought she might be able to learn something from the very walls.

But the walls had become curtained by the darkness; and she wished now that she had lit the lamp before lying down to her suppositional slumber. It was too late to do it now, even though she heard Storm leave the next room. His return at any moment was of course possible; and then he would know that she had only been feigning.

While Miss Lavinia was considering what was best for her to do she was startled by a light tapping at the window.

A day or so ago she would most likely have screamed at hearing the sound.

Now she crept cautiously to the side of the frame and looked out.

She saw a hand, and that was all. It was raised again, and the tapping was renewed. Either it was a trap of some kind, or else the party without wanted to communicate with her in a way that would not attract the attention of any one else.

The latter was the view Miss Lavinia chose to take. Very carefully she raised the window. Then a face popped up in front of her—the face of Tombstone Tom.

"Hist!" he said. "Don't you say a word. I've got pints by the dozen. If you want to hear 'em I'll be better come in, for I'll see things further before I'll stay out hyar in the damp."

"Hush!" retorted Miss Lavinia, her voice just as full of warning. "I've had a dreadful scare, and I don't believe the danger is over yet. I would sooner be out there in the night than in here. Can't you take me away somewhere, where I will be safe?"

"Couldn't think of it, marm, fur whar would I be then? It's bad enuf this hyar way, but it's the best I kin do. Keep shady an' I reckon I'll pull yer through. I'm comin'."

And into the room crawled the man, without waiting for further permission, closing the window carefully after him.

"Now ef yell tell me how things hev bin

goin' on mebbe it'll do me good, though I think I'm squar' on his trail."

Miss Lavinia had shrunk away in some dismay; but the business-like tones of her man reassured her. He was evidently in haste and had no time for sentimental foolishness.

In a few words she related what had happened, finishing up by asking him what he had been doing?

"Bin playin' dead an' buried; an' dog-gone my pictur's ef thar wa'n't a touch too nigh to thar ginoine thing ter be comfortable."

"I war dead—that much war solid—but an ole side pard ov mine, he stopped thar funer'l percess' an' made it mighty lively fur thar boys. Thar fun got so red-hot they dropped thar corpus an' run; an' that's how yours truly kin ter be left in thar land ov thar livin'. Ez they hed thar grave all dug I filled it up myself, an' since then I've bin slightly skeerse 'round my ole stompin'-grounds. Ef I hadn't I wouldn't bin hyar ter-night."

"But for what did you come?" inquired Miss Lavinia, hardly certain whether or not to believe the story he told.

"Ter hear what's goin' on in thar next room, an' hev a sight, ez fur ez thar money goes, fur what'll be goin' on in this. When you hear 'em tune up you'll understand better. I'd advise yer ter stretch out ez yer war, an' I'll be outen thar way ov any durned inquisitive cusses. I think thar's comin' now."

Mr. Burke did not wait to make himself certain, but disappeared under the bed with a celerity that might mean ordinary caution, but almost looked like something else.

"Have you got a pistol, Mr. Burke?" asked Miss Lavinia, bending down.

"Severial," answered Tombstone Tom, "an' kin use 'em. Now, you git out ef yer don't want bloodshed."

Miss Storm gave a sigh of content, and resumed her old position. Just as she settled herself Senator Storm entered the next room, accompanied by some one else.

"A minute," she heard him say. "I want a look in the next room. I'd wager a thousand dollars that it is all right, but I want to know."

Again the door opened, and Senator Storm stood on the threshold, holding in his hand the lamp.

Everything appeared as he had left it.

"We can have our talk first; she is as quiet as a log. Fire ahead, Wharton. Tell your story. There's an hour yet before we can make any move. The devil has been to pay, has it? Well, so much the better. It was about time for the gang to retire."

CHAPTER XXX.

THE CARDS ARE ALL FACED AND TOMBSTONE TOM HOLDS TRUMPS.

If the two could have known how comfortably Tombstone Tom was fixed for observation, and how intently Miss Aurora was listening, they might not have settled down so complacently, to the conversation they were evidently anxious to have.

Burke had struck a bonanza, in the shape of a knot-hole in the partition, and had obtained at least one fair view of Senator Storm's companion.

He was not altogether surprised to see that it was the young man who had been known at Poison Pete's by the name of Martin Lee.

"So you have got over your splutter, have you? I didn't think you could lose your head so completely. Very unfortunate it is, of course, and all that; but in another way it's not so bad, as you can easily see. I've felt they were rather in the way of developments, and I sha'n't own much over them. The couple I have been using at the Bar won't last long now. You look somewhat the worse for wear yourself."

The senator was as unconcerned and matter-of-fact as though he was not talking of the death of a dozen men. His *vis-a-vis* evidently tried to imitate his example of coolness.

"That's all true enough; but, curse it, man, don't you think I have any natural feeling? They've saved my life among them a dozen times, and I haven't got over the horror of having them all go under in a heap. And I could have stood it to see them go if it hadn't been for the girl."

"Ab, yes. Well, the girl was as headstrong a piece of calico as I ever met, and that's saying a good deal. She had her head set on that Wilde—who the deuce would ever have imagined that she had a heart! If she had been content to play her part as we had it laid out we might have raked in the shekels. When I saw she had lost her head, I was willing to throw up the sponge as far as I was concerned. Of course, if you could bring him to terms, that was something else."

"No doubt—and you would have wanted your share."

"Certainly. I always look after that."

"Well, you won't get it, now. He knows the truth, and wouldn't look at her if she was the last woman on earth. He heard some pretty plain talk and then got away from us."

"And blew up the dam?"

"Not much. It took a woman to do that—the woman you call John Melchor's daughter."

"The woman who is John Melchor's daughter."

"Not a bit of it. I know something about that. The real daughter was the woman you used as your tool—the innocent, guileless Aurora Storm, who went up the flume. I know, for she was once my wife."

For once Senator Storm allowed himself to be thoroughly astonished. He straightened up suddenly from his seat.

"And do you mean to say, Wilse Wharton, that when we talked over all this together, and considered the plan of bringing forward this woman at the fitting time; that then you knew that it would be no farce?"

"Of course. What is the use of knowledge if you don't make use of it? I intended to work the oracle when the time came."

"Why not have told the plain truth, and saved all the extra planning and scheming?"

"Because that would have cut me off from help that I needed. It was necessary for the girl to believe that as she had been made so she could be unmoved. As the undoubted heir to half a million she would not have let one of us come within a mile of her."

"And I, too, was included in your schemes."

"That was about the breadth of it."

"And why, pray? Is there no honor among thieves?"

"A great deal of honor, perhaps; and a thundering lot of selfishness. Unless I did make a divy I would have had the honorable Simon leeching me of much more than the divine Aurora and myself could afford. Don't you suppose I know what my identity is worth? The man that could put his finger down on my head and say, 'There is Wilse Wharton, the road-agent; here is Iron-Arm, the outlaw,' would be too dangerous to have in the distance! Pards in a set-up job, with the Honorable Simon Storm as a confidential friend—that seemed twice as safe."

Storm's anger had already disappeared. He seated himself with a smile.

"I always did insist that you had a clear head, but I never knew it as thoroughly as now. Let that pass. You say that as far as the Melchor matter is concerned, you give it up. You also say the gang is practically annihilated, that Wilde has made his escape, and the girl we have believed to be the heiress to the Melchor property is turned loose. What next? You hardly expect me take you on at the Snorter? Martin Lee is a very peaceable-looking character; but really and truly he cannot show his face at Walnut Bar without danger to his neck. I've got enough to contend with as it is, without taking on more of a load."

"Yes I should smile. The man you tried to kill the other night—Tombstone Tom, as he calls himself—is a mighty bad man to have in one's wake, and he's in yours. Mike Marshall is another, and you'll find him around about the time he gets the bear-tamer off of his mind. I have an idea that even young Wilde, with his stack of checks and his rich relations, would be enough to make you uncomfortable. The fact is, you've sprung the cards without squaring it with the cue-keeper. You've gone into a big game here without remembering that you had an interest in a couple of tables along the road. You have oceans of sand; but salt won't save you if I don't chip in and carry you through."

"Thank you. I've got money coming, and a good revolver here. What can you do for me that I couldn't get out of the first pick-up I come across?"

"I can tell you. I know you through and through already, so I ask for no confidences. If you had a million you would gamble it away, and I want some of the pickings. I can kill Wilde, recapture the girl—if that's an object—and draw Mike Marshall to Halifax and back by just telling him Will Wharton is ahead of him. He was a bad man on the Feather river, but he's solid lightning now, and he's here to get even. I've fouled him twice and now he means it; but I'm waiting for him. He's dropped half a dozen men since he struck those trails, but he'll drop no more."

"And how is all this work to be done?"

"By Funny Fred and his gang."

"Ha, what have you to do with them?"

"Not much, of course. Only I am Funny Fred. You have heard of having two strings to one's bow? Well, I had two gangs at my back. Your interest with Iron-Arm and his band having collapsed, now is your chance to make terms with Funny Fred and his bold riders."

"You infernal, double-dealing scoundrel!"

Senator Storm seemed lost in indignation.

"While I have been working the racket on the square, you have been playing false all around. How do you expect me to trust you again after hearing that?"

"Because I've come to the last ditch. It's now die dog or eat the hatchet."

"I am not sure but what you are right," said Storm, becoming thoughtful.

"If you can do what you promise, and for the sake of old times, I can afford to pay you well—and I will. Are you ready for real work

—the work that we had planned for to-night? No sentimental foolishness, you know; but business."

"I am—more so than you think for. I can relieve you of the divine Lavinia. It is very uncomfortable for you to find that the matter of the will has all been a mistake; but I think by the time she has been in Funny Fred's fingers for a week she will be ready to arrange it in accordance with the dictates of common-sense—even to any little antedating that you may think advisable. After that I can guarantee she never makes a reappearance."

"And when will you do this?"

"Now; to-night; at once. It was to be a thousand extra when we were in partnership; it will be worth double that since we are each working our own games."

"And you can wait a short time for the two thousand?"

"I can. I am the one man living that can tell who Simon Storm really is; with that knowledge, as long as I can save my throat, I am not afraid of losing a paltry little two thousand."

"Good enough," answered Storm, suddenly and heartily. "When you commence to threaten I know you are in earnest. Begin to-night; but first give me an offing."

"We'll go out together. It is just as well that we can have clean-looking records in case something should happen. We'll drop in at Poison Pete's. It oughtn't to be hard to find a way to kill time for an hour or so. After that you can come back and make all the discoveries you want to."

The singularly assorted couple rose. They were almost as nearly foes as friends, and yet trusted each other more than most men trust their fellow mortals. It was their business to take great risks; and they took them without sentimentality and with very little disguise. The living troubled them very little, and the dead still less. Wharton casually remarked:

"You are sure she will give no trouble until the boys fairly have her there?"

"Wait a minute. I will see."

Storm cautiously turned the key and once more looked into the other room. He wanted to be very certain.

There was a motionless heap on the bed. As far as he could see Miss Lavinia had not moved.

"She is sound enough. If you don't believe it look for yourself."

"Thanks. I'll take your word for it. Let us be moving."

The two went out as carelessly as though strolling away for a walk.

"Hush!" said Tombstone Tom in a sharp whisper as the sound of their footsteps died away.

"Don't yer move. We've got a cl'ar case fur us; but they'd swear we dreamed it ef you an' me got ter tellin' sich a yarn 'bout Simon Storm. We'll hev ter ketch 'em in ther overt ack. It won't be long ter wait. But did yer ever hear sich a cool pa'r afore in yer life? It beats a bob-tail flush flat."

Miss Lavinia did not answer. She was too frightened. Enough of the conversation had come to her ears for her to catch the drift of it. Though much of it was Greek, she understood the latter part sufficiently to know that she was the central figure around which it revolved. She was ready to take even Tombstone Tom's advice. For half an hour she lay quiet, scarcely daring to breathe.

Senator Storm and his attendant made themselves visible to Johnny Goodman and then started out for a stroll.

They passed several hang-dog-looking skulkers, but no words did they exchange with any one until they entered the Best Chance.

Yet signals had been given; for the three men skulked away toward Johnny Goodman's.

They had evidently had their instruction beforehand. They spent no time in examination from without, but went straight toward Miss Lavinia's window.

The sash opened without much difficulty, and the first man proceeded to enter.

"Look sharp out there, and I'll hand her out."

The desperado heard Miss Lavinia's heavy breathing and thought that everything was plain sailing. Having whispered as much to his comrades outside he turned toward the bed, on which he could see the dim outlines of Miss Storm.

Then something very mysterious occurred. Immediately in front of him a dark form arose, and then came the sound of a crashing blow as Tombstone Tom struck straight out from the shoulder.

The man went down like a log; and Burke, jerking out a revolver with either hand sprung out of the window, while Miss Aurora lifted up her voice in a succession of shrieks that rang through the house like a steam calliope at high pressure.

CHAPTER XXXI.
BAD BEN GOES INTO BUSINESS ON HIS OWN ACCOUNT.

WHEN the outlaw leader told Simon Storm that Aurora had been killed in the rush of the

water he said no more than he thought was the truth.

It is true that he had not found the body, though he had given such time to searching for it as he was able to spare.

There was another corpse or two missing from the tally, but that was easy to account for when the superficial nature of the search was taken into consideration.

But Aurora was more prudent than Wharton suspected, and had not been struck by the water at all, though she escaped it by barely an inch, since she had followed too far for prudence's sake, and saw the mad rush go by.

At first she held her breath in horror; afterward she took as philosophical a view of matters as did Storm himself.

"Let it be so. The flood has saved me the trouble of doing what sooner or later I must have done. It has carried Wharton to his death

and if Wilde lives I am free to find him. If I can meet him in this wilderness he must bend, if for very shame's sake. Yet to hope to find him now takes more faith in myself and my good fortune than I am sure that I possess. I would give a thousand or two out of that fortune that I hope one day to have, for a guide.

I think I could even bend Wharton himself into service if I could cover him with these revolvers. There must be some way out of this labyrinth that Wilde has found. If I could only follow it."

While she was soliloquizing the help that she was wishing for suddenly appeared. Bad Ben came hastening toward her, with wild excitement depicted on his face.

"How many of 'em are gone?" he asked, hurriedly.

"Every one," answered Aurora, looking up. "You and I, so far as I know are the only ones left alive. The waters came down like a hurricane, and swept them all away. If there is anything in the cave that is worth carrying off it belongs to you and me."

"I don't see whar your share comes in at," retorted Ben, angrily, and his eyes were full of suspicion."

"Probably not; but as the widow of the late lamented Wharton, I shall certainly look very closely after it."

Her hand was on her revolver and she was ready to take the drop on the instant that Bad Ben made an aggressive movement. He knew well enough who she was, and she certainly was posted in regard to him.

Instead of manifesting anger, he uttered a harsh, barking laugh.

"Ho, ho! You kin hev' ther bull outfit, ez fur ez I'm concerned. What yer find hyar ain't wuth ther carryin' away. But what are we ter do?"

"I would find the young man who was a prisoner here with me. Wharton swore to me he had escaped, though I did not believe him. Can you tell me where he is? Was it he that made this trouble, think you?"

"I reckon. He's skipped, an' we've been after him ther bull day. He's picked up some pards ez knows ther mountains like a book. Let him go, er you'll make trouble."

"Not while there is money in him. He is not altogether lost. Find him for me and you shall be well paid."

"Mebbe—speshbly ef he sees me a fraxyun ov a minute fust. He'd draw an' plug."

"Not at me," answered Aurora, confidently.

"Have you any idea where he may be found?"

"He ain't fur off, that I'll bet rocks; an' I could take yer that way. Ef yer hev any stamps ter put up, though, I'd advise yer ter spud 'em out afore yer gets started. Ez fur me, I don't banker ter see him, an' I reckon ter run away on sight."

"But you will take me to him?"

"Fur stamps. I'll put yer whar yer kin see him, er I'll refund."

"It is a bargain. Then you may take yourself away as fast as you choose. Lucky for you that I carry my bank in my pocket. Here. It is enough to give you a little start in the world. There are a few hundred there. It is all that I can do."

Recklessly she handed him a little roll of bills; and eagerly he seized it.

"It's right yer are. That's ther argyments ter convince Bad Ben. Foller me."

He turned away and retraced his steps for some distance. As they went along, Aurora asked for some information in regard to what had happened, and he told her the little that he knew.

Some spies, who were evidently desperate men as well, had penetrated into the gulches, which had hitherto proved an impenetrable retreat. Without doubt, it was they who had aided Wilde. Then they had come back, met with another prisoner, and being discovered, had fled by the way the outlaws had thought was known only to themselves, springing the trap as they passed it.

This was about all that he could tell, but it was enough, especially when he closed with:

"Ez fur ez I kin figger, they're in a scrape theirselves, ef they don't come this way ag'in, onless they hev a back door open, ez I don't know nothin' 'bout. They've cut away tho

bridge bebind 'em, an' can't go fur for'ra'ds. I'll take yer whar yer can see 'em—ef I don't miss it bad—an' then I'll skip lively."

As yet Aurora had no idea that Wilde had heard her conversation with Iron-Arm; and she believed that if she met him once more, she could complete the spell which she knew she had already begun to weave around him.

She had her explanations ready, and trusted to her wit and beauty to carry them through. To her guide the crooked paths and winding recesses were plain, and her hopes rose with every step traveled.

And meantime, the objects of her search had sought cover. There were barriers in front, and they didn't know what dangers followed behind.

CHAPTER XXXII.

AURORA'S RESCUE.

WHEN Wilson Wharton—to choose one of his many names—was making his boasts to his confederate of what he could do, he kept one piece of information back.

He had reason to believe that he had the parties mentioned corralled already.

Iron-Arm was deaf; his band, so far as he knew was totally defunct; but Funny Fred had sprung into the arena with a gang at his back. The fugitives had made the mistake of not retracing their steps, and following the rush of the water, which would have taken them straight down to striking distance of the broad trail that led to the Bar, even if they missed Magic Mike en route.

They missed their chance, however, and when they turned around to make their way out of a cul-de-sac into which they had drifted, through a mistake of Mountain Jim's, they heard careful footsteps at the other end of the short passage to the main canyon.

"Easy, my lord," said Poncho Pete to his partner.

"Ther's trouble in ther distans. Shell we give 'em a hail ter stand off, er shell we let 'em drap right inter a hull calaboose ov fun?"

"Fun! We don't want no fun hyar. Halt, thar! Show up yer hand mighty sudden er some one draps."

The latter part was spoken in a sharp, quick voice; and it had its effect. The low, shuffling sound ceased, and all was quiet.

The spot where the fugitives stood had its advantages.

They were just at the crest of a sharp acclivity, with cover on either side, so that if trouble was to come, here was the place to meet it. With Alta well under shelter the three men could hold their own against a dozen here, even in the black shadows that curtained the gloomy chasm.

Probably the men whom they had heard understood this as well as themselves; but they knew, too, the advantages of keeping them in the recess, which made a close prison so long as they remained across its outlet as the bars.

But while Mountain Jim was holding them at bay, Poncho Pete, as reckless as ever, crept forward for a closer view.

He went as noiseless as a cat, but he was heard.

"Hold hard there!" shouted a coarse voice. "We don't want ter sling any stray bullets until we kin pick an' choose. Ther captain'd raise merry thunder ef we scooped ther wrong man. Lay low thar, an' we'll let yer be till ther time comes ter pick out some fur a hangin'-bee, an' some fur cold lead, an' some fur somethin' else."

Poncho Pete spoke promptly:

"That's our game to er fracshun, an' meantime we'll be gittin' away with every last galoot ez gits on our side ov ther line. We'll leave war till ther time comes."

It seemed strange that the two parties should enter into an armed armistice; but after all, there was nothing better for them to do. The outlaws were an unknown force, but the chances were that there were enough to prevent escape, since in the darkness numbers must tell.

"Come back," whispered Alta, touching Wilde lightly on the arm, and speaking in the lowest of audible tones.

"It is lighter beyond, and we may find some way of exit—or may be able to stand in their way if they try to flank us. If we get between two fires we are lost."

The girl had gotten over her fierce passion, and was now as cool as the coolest. If she was to feel a reaction when she once believed her revenge accomplished, it had not yet come.

And she had every reason to think that Wharton had gone to his last account. It was he that she struck at when she sent the water-spout down the canyon, and she had seen him swallowed up in its torrent.

The two fell back, and explored the pocket in the rocks as well as they could.

Nothing in the way of discovery rewarded their effort. They could only crouch and listen.

It was too late for a rush at the other end, and it looked as though they were so securely eaged that surrender would only be a matter of time.

Mountain Jim and his comrade might break through, but what hope was there for a girl, daring though she might be?

What seemed to be a long time passed without any material change in position or prospect.

Then Harvey Wilde distinctly heard his name called.

He listened, but made no answer. The sound was near, but he did not know in exactly what direction to look for it.

A second time he heard it, and then he recognized the fact that it was from above. He looked up, and answered:

"Well?"

"I can save you; for the rest I will not answer. Be quick; do not hesitate. It is your last chance. Come!"

He was not surprised when a rope came dropping down from above. The adventures of the last few days had made him acquainted with the possibilities of these canyons; and it seemed to him that almost anything might happen in the labyrinth to the north of Walnut Bar.

He recognized the voice now, and shrank from being aided by the woman he thought he at last understood.

"I am not alone here," he answered calmly. "If you help one, you must save us all. Promise me, or I will not move a step."

Aurora might be honest in her intentions, but who could say that she was not acting as decoy for the men on the watch beyond the passageway to the neighboring canyon?

"I will save the rest if I can, but I swear to you that you must come first. We have been together in danger too long for me to desert you."

"She means it," whispered Alta.

Her feminine instincts told her that Aurora was honestly earnest.

"And you think it is not intended for a trap?"

His voice sank so low that it could not be heard above.

"No. Whoever or whatever she may be, she means what she says without a doubt—at least for you."

He raised his voice a little higher:

"I will not come first, but I will come second. There is a woman here, and she must be saved first of all. Let her come up while I speak to the rest."

"A woman?"

Aurora uttered the exclamation in a hissing, snake-like tone. Then her voice changed again.

"Why should she be jealous or fear?"

"Let her come; but be quick."

"Go up without delay," he said to Alta, and then turned to tell Poncho Pete and his pard of the singular chance that had befallen them.

Alta seized the cord with the practiced grasp of a gymnast. She needed no help, and she received none, though it was a journey that but few women could make unaided.

Only when she had come to the end, Aurora leaned forward and caught her by the shoulder.

"Will he come next?" she hissed. "If he does not, I swear I will hurl you down to die with him. No man shall trick me—nor woman, either!"

"You have his word for it," answered Alta. "As for me, I can take care of myself. Hands off, or one of us goes down now!"

She sprung suddenly away, and there was the sound of a harsh click as the hammer of the revolver that had been placed in her hand by Poncho Pete went back. By the movement, she not only threw Aurora in front of her, but the man who knelt a little back from the brink of the ledge, holding in his hands the rope by which she had ascended.

The action was a declaration of war, for which Aurora was not yet ready.

At that moment the rope was twitched from below.

"Are you ready? I am coming."

Then Wilde, true to his word, caught the cord, and essayed to follow where Alta had led.

She had made the ascent with something like ease; it was different with him. Even though he had the muscles of an athlete, he lacked the experienced skill.

To fail was death, however; and at last he reached the top in safety, and was drawn over upon the ledge by two pairs of female hands.

Exhausted, quivering, out of breath, he staggered to his feet a moment, and then fell forward against Bad Ben.

It may have been this, or it may have been in accordance with a premeditated plot, to which this was a fitting adjunct. At that Bad Ben suddenly collapsed, and the rope, dropping from his hands, went rattling down into the gulch below.

Aurora uttered what seemed like a genuine cry of dismay.

"They are lost! It barely reached, and it is not in the power of man to fling the end so that we can catch it. We will have to abandon them to their fate."

She was a consummate actress. There was the ring of true tragedy in her voice, and once more and for the last time she deceived Wilde,

whom the accident had brought back to his senses.

He leaned over.

"What shall we do?"

"Say no more," answered the cheerful voice of Poncho Pete.

"We're rid of you an' ther gal, an' ther rest are jest a gay old picnic. Look out fur yerself, an' we'll tork over 'counts when we meet at Walnut Bar. We're goin' to ther front now. Good-by, an' be off with yer!"

There was no deception in the cheerful view of the case, and Wilde turned away feeling reassured, to see Aurora standing near him gloomily eying Alta, who watched her with the glance of an eagle.

"Don't stay hyar," broke in Bad Ben. "I'm solid an' squar', an' I'll tell yer why. I'd break my neck fur this hyar jewel in petticoats—an' I owe Wilse Wharton one. He's went back on me, an' counted me out on his other gang. I'm a hard 'un ter look at, but man ner angels kin say that when yer tread on Bad Ben he don't git even. I'll take yer to a kiver, whar yer kin hold ther edge while them gerloots looks over ther hand."

Whether he meant treachery in the end or not, for the present he was the only resource, and they followed him without a word. Aurora herself knew that she could scarcely trust him more safely than the rest.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

EPH GETS IN HIS WORK.

A DOZEN times Bad Ben had it in his power to strike down any or all the others in the little party, but no desire for foul play did he show. If Wilde had known better what his relation was to Aurora he would have suspected him less, though gradually he felt confidence growing and suspicion vanishing.

At least the outlaw knew the way well, and seemed anxious they should come to no harm from the natural pitfalls that lay along their path, in the dark corners, when the moonlight failed to fall.

"An' hyar yer are, safe in ther leetle retreat, when I'd layed out ter come ef it ever got too hot below fur an honest man ov my size. Make yerselves ter home. A bloodhound couldn't nose yer out hyar, an' we kin go no furder ter-night."

He halted in another of the little caverns with which this region seemed studded.

"I'll keep an eye out all ther same, an' frolic 'round in ther distance, an' you kin git all ther solid sleep yer a mind ter."

There was no objection made to his standing on guard, but before he went he lit a torch, and showed them something of the refuge to which he had brought them.

Cold comfort there—yet it was better than the bare rocks outside. There were several rooms, and material for couches, though it had hitherto all been heaped upon one bed. With but little discussion, Aurora led Alta away, Bad Ben departed, while Wilde sunk down upon his pallet, uncertain whether sleep would visit his eyes, but willing to husband his strength as far as possible for the hour of emergency which he had no doubt would soon come.

But sleep did come. Before he had realized that it was near to him he dropped off into unconsciousness, and his slumbers were, for a time, undisturbed.

Then he was awakened by a slight cry, followed by the sound of a struggle.

The noises came from the part of the cave occupied by the two women. Though the light of the torch had died away, he sprung to his feet, and rushed toward the spot. In his eagerness he did not see that his revolver had slipped from his belt, and that he was coming upon the scene unarmed.

What he had expected to see he knew not. A half smoldering brand lay upon the rocky floor of the cave, and the two shadows writhing in conflict were Aurora and Alta. As he came nearer, the former leaped up and aside with a low cry of triumph, holding in her hands Alta's weapons.

"Hush! Not a word higher than a whisper, or you die at once. After all that I have sacrificed for the sake of him, do you think I would allow a thing like you to come between us? And you watched me as though I was a tiger, waiting to spring. If I am a tiger, you—you are a snake. But I have drawn your fangs. Strike if you can."

"You are mad," retorted Alta. "What is he to me? Until this night I never saw him—I care not if I never see him again. I watched you because I know you of old. Did you think I had forgotten, or would forget? Are not your hands red with blood; or was it only your confederate that did that deed?"

"What mean you?"

"Oh, you cannot deceive me. We once looked enough alike to be sisters, and some thought us such, though they were mistaken. There were two men that looked enough alike to be brothers—and they were not. Until the last few hours I have believed the worst of the innocent—and I know now you were the partner of the guilty."

"And you dare to threaten me?"

Aurora drew herself up as though ready to spring and strike.

"Yea. Now I threaten. If I cannot prove the worst crime of all, I can tell enough to stagger the world."

"What, pray? Tell me before I kill you."

"I may have much more to learn, but I already know enough. You are called Aurora Storm now. No doubt it should have been Myrtle Wharton once as it was Myrtle Dane before. You are not Simon Storm's daughter, and he is as vile a fraud as you are. A grand thing it would be for the cast-off wife—if wife she was—of Wilse Wharton to marry the son of a millionaire. But I will stand between. I will bunt you down, since you were a witness, if not an aider, in your so-called husband's crimes. I came here to hunt him down. I warn you that you will not long survive him."

A flood-tide of passion carried Alta along. Her sœurs, her bitterness and her threats rolled out in a current that could not be stayed.

Yet she was not ready to die, and when she saw death in the eye of the woman she had braved beyond pardon and knew that the rising revolver was being aimed at her life, she turned and fled.

Wilde had listened, amazed. Now, as Alta flitted past him, he caught at her arm, calling her by name.

She did not stop—perhaps did not hear him.

Then he sprung between her and Aurora, not reckoning on the vengeful fury of the woman desisted.

The butt of the heavy revolver fell on his head, and he staggered back, while Aurora darted on.

She heard the noise of a stumble and fall in the outer cave, and as she entered it a light flared up, and an instant later a hideous growl fell upon her ears.

Bad Ben stood at the outer entrance, a flaming torch in one hand, a cocked revolver in the other, aimed at the back of Alta's head.

The girl had halted and turned, but not through fear of Bad Ben. There was perhaps worse danger behind. From the shadows came the growl that had startled Aurora, and as Alta wheeled there shambled out a monster with gleaming teeth and flaming eyes. It halted half-way between the two girls, and rising on its hind feet looked from one to the other in a way that had a devilish comicality. Was it Old Eph, or was it an untamed brute from the barrancas?

Alta stood with her hand uplifted. The light falling upon her from behind threw her eyes in the shade and no chance was there to fix the beast with their brightness, yet it looked away from her, over its shoulder, toward Aurora.

Aurora had halted from surprise, but she showed no fear. The axes of her eyes met the brute's without flinching. Her late experience had given her confidence. At Walnut Bar Eph had run away from her, yet probably he had followed her here at last. If it hesitated between her and Alta now, a word might bring him to her feet. She had the courage that would try all things, and believed all things possible. She spoke firmly and with the same wave of the hand she had already used:

"Down, Eph; down, sir, and come here!"

The animal turned up its head at the first sound of her voice, dropped to its feet, and came slowly toward her, reached her, rose again.

Then—it gave one mighty stroke that crumpled her and crushed her as if she had been an egg-shell. It was no more Old Eph than she was Alta the tamer!

The one blow was sufficient. The beast gave no more, but, uttering a hideous roar, wheeled once more with wide-open jaws.

Bad Ben had seen this tragedy enacted, with a blinding quickness. He had a wicked courage, but it could not carry him further in this. He would not wait for further ending, but still holding his torch, and without a single shot that might only further enrage the monster, he sprang backward, leaving Alta and Harvey Wilde to their fate.

He made one leap—and then fell to the ground. A man at that moment gliding up struck him a crushing blow.

As the outlaw fell Magic Mike snatched up the torch, and swinging it around his head bounded into the cave.

He was just in time. At the further end Wilde, weaponless and dazed, was staggering forward. The light blinded his eyes; he tripped and fell across the torn but still quivering body of Aurora.

Alta, unable to retreat, and with no weapon with which to offer resistance was crouched against the wall; while the grizzly had raised itself to give one more death-dealing stroke.

Marshall neither hesitated nor was at fault. His quick eye took in all the scene at one sweeping glance, and with a bound of a dozen feet he was at the side of the brute, the muzzle of his pistol into its ear and pulling the trigger almost in a breath.

The beast staggered; and Marshall bounded back.

Once, twice, thrice his revolver spoke, as fast as hammer could rise and fall. Then he flung

the weapon aside and drew the heavy knife that swung in his belt, thrusting fiercely with it as the beast closed in.

He had used the torch also but that had been dashed from his hand.

Torch and pistol fell at Alta's feet and she snatched them up with an eager courage.

She swung the torch into a flame and for an instant stared by its light at the man that was battling so fiercely for her life as well as his own.

She knew him only too well. Of late she had believed that she hated him, but she knew differently now. Without even a cry she closed in, placing the muzzle of the pistol she held so close that it singed the hair when she fired.

Desperately wounded was the brute already in a dozen places. The one shot finished the work, for the bullet went straight for its heart.

Then Magic Mike staggered back breathless and bleeding yet clinging to his senses since he saw Alta before him.

"Trust me," he gasped. "There has been a fearful mistake, but all is being cleared at last."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

SIMON STORM MEETS WITH A COMPLETE SURPRISE.

The evening was well advanced, but there were plenty of people in Johnny Goodman's to be attracted by Miss Lavinia's shrieks, and they made their appearance as if by magic.

First of all Goodman burst open the door.

If he had had his way, he would have kept the rest of the crowd out, but he thought of it too late. The crowd was on hand, just at his back, and there was no shutting it off.

Fortunately, Goodman carried a lantern, and for that reason he was able to take in the scene at once.

On the floor lay the man that Tombstone Tom had struck—a burly ruffian, who looked like a corpse—while Miss Lavinia was standing over him, uttering scream after scream.

The first result was a roar of laughter from the crowd. The men of the Bar were tolerably chivalrous so far as pretty young women were concerned. For the rest they didn't care a cent.

"Blame my eyes if she hasn't talked him dead an' are holdin' a wake over his corpus!"

"Look out for the engine; I hear the whistle blowin'!"

Such exclamations as these were heard; but curiosity predominated, and they ceased as Miss Lavinia suddenly regained her composure at sight of the help at hand.

"Seize him, the wretch!" she cried, "and there's more of them outside. Help him quick, or my brave defender will be murdered. Don't you hear?"

The allusion to the brave defender would have been so much Greek had not Tombstone Tom's voice arisen outside.

At that there was a rush to the window, half a dozen heads filling it up from top to bottom.

Tombstone Tom had come upon the waiting outlaws so suddenly and unexpectedly that they had no time or chance for resistance. With the butt of the pistols he held in either hand, he dealt each a crashing blow, before which they went down like ten-pins.

Then the muzzles dropped in line, as he covered them with a deadly aim.

"Don't you move," he shouted. "If we don't know now who's the dark boss ez backs the game I am a liar. I've got somethin' cornered at last."

Of course no one understood the full meaning of this, but it was not hard to see that something villainous and desperate had been attempted; and the reappearance of Burke was a wild surprise.

"I've got 'em," he continued without looking up. "The rankest kind ov bu'glors they be. Some on yer kinder gather 'em in afore they wake up an' begin shootin'. Yer didn't think Tombstone Tom'd be 'round, did yer; but he's hyar every time."

Before he had ceased speaking his three prisoners, who were not at all seriously injured, were seized, disarmed, and rendered perfectly powerless for evil.

Then the question was asked, what next? and just at that time two men appeared on the scene, running from the direction of Poison Pete's, the advance-guard of the crowd that had suddenly been emptied out of that place.

"What's all this?" asked the first of these two, as sharply as was possible for a man to do who was as nearly out of breath as he was. "Where is my sister; and what has happened?"

It was an unfortunate question. With a suddenness that was alarming Miss Lavinia appeared at the window brushing aside the men that had filled it.

"Liar!" she shouted. "I am not your sister. Seize him, too. He was in the plot, and they would have murdered me for my money. Ob, I know you now. You have killed the girl that you said was your daughter and you wanted to kill me. Yonder is the robber of the gulches—the chief of the gang—and the man that called himself my brother is only his partner. Take him, alive or dead!"

She had not uttered half a dozen words before Simon Storm knew that not only had his drug been a failure, but that Miss Lavinia had overheard his conversation with Wharton, and that, if the crowd believed her he was lost, so far as Walnut Bar went.

He did not lose his courage.

"Is that the cause of all this alarm—a half-crazy woman waking from an attack of the nightmare? There seems to have been a fight outside here, and the noise has set her wild. Go away, if you please, gentlemen. In a few minutes she will be herself again."

He spoke so coolly that if there had not been evidence to the contrary—of which he knew nothing—he might have succeeded in dismissing the crowd.

"How about the man inside?" queried one of the inquisitive bystanders. "What were he doin' sashayin' round in her room? I tell yer, ther old gal hez a head ez level as I keer ter find 'em."

"Yes. How about the man inside?" inquired another. "Give the ole gal a chance. Feller-citizens, yer bev heerd sum purty flat footed charges. Whatcher say to 'em? Hyar's these pris'ners an' ther man we call Tombstone Tom ter investigate. Them ez are in favor ov Uncle Judge Lynch takin' ther cheer sing out so at once. An' I name General Sidney St. George ter warm ther cheer till his honor comes."

"That proposition comes from the man who tried to buy into Snorter's Gulch, and got left," said Storm hastily.

He evinced no alarm, but if there were any close observers they must have seen that his fingers were feeling cautiously for his weapon. He knew that in this out-of-the-way place, where he expected to have things as he wanted them, he was going to have a fight for his life, and lose much if not all of the various big stakes he had played for.

"Snorter's Gulch be hanged!" retorted the speaker. "I'll own that after you're hung, er my name ain't Dan ther Drover. What yer sayin', boys? Them ez ar' fur Judge Lynch just howl."

Even yet there was no uprising of popular indignation; and so far as developments had gone it seemed hardly to be a case for vigilante justice; yet three or four voices chimed in so promptly that others went along with the rising stream, without stopping to consider that this might be a put-up job.

Of course there might be men on the other side; but the only person who, at the moment, expressed his opposition was General St. George.

"Oh, come now, Daniel, that's a mean advantage to take on me because I come lounging along to see the fun. I don't mind doing my duty as a citizen; but I have peculiar reasons why I don't want to act in this case. I'm afraid I couldn't give the man a fair show; I'm prejudiced already."

"Prejudizes he hanged! What bev you got to do with it? You git all ther evidences together an' we'll tell ef he's guilty."

"I couldn't really. The fact is, gentlemen, I've two reasons. The party owes me a heap of money—secured by mortgages, I'll admit—and secondly, there must be a fraud somewhere because—well, you couldn't believe me, maybe, but I'm Simon Storm, myself."

The senator had not interrupted this because he and Wharton had been conversing in a low tone. Now he raised his left hand.

"Ho there, you gulchers! stick together. There's a plot to jump our mine. Don't shoot till the time comes; but, when the trouble begins stay there till the last horn blows."

Storm had been at the Bar but a few days, and his interest in Snorter's Gulch did not reach back even that far, but he evidently knew his men. With a sudden rush a dozen men pushed into a compact little knot.

"Now then, gentlemen, I'm willing to listen to reason; but for those that desire to tramp on my toes, I want them to understand that there's a good chance to get a call for breakfast in the infernal regions shortly after they begin to crowd.

"That's ther way ter talk it. Put her there, pard, put her right thar. I'm with yer till day-light."

The speaker was Tombstone Tom, who seemed to have suddenly changed his base, and advanced with outstretched hand and what was intended to be an affectionate leer in his eye.

The harsh sound of a revolver being brought to full cock was heard, and as he drew, Storm exclaimed:

"Stand back, you ruffly loafer. Another step nearer and I'll dril you. You're at the bottom, somehow, of this whole infernal business. When the coroner sits on you he'll say: 'Died from sticking his nose in other men's business.'"

"Every man's his own corryner out hyar, an' I'll put off the inkwest on meself till tharlas' minute; but meantime—"

"We have him soul."

A strange voice finished the sentence, and then, from behind, Mountain Jim, who had approached unseen, hurled himself upon Simon Storm.

CHAPTER XXXV.

HIS HONOR, JUDGE LYNCH.

WALNUT BAR was pretty much all there, and ripe for a row. A little more light might have been acceptable, and a better understanding of what it was all about; but the boys were ready to chip in anyway, if they were divided in their counsels. The lynchers were still in earnest, the men from Snorter's Gulch were still backing their owner's hand, while the new arrival only announced his wishes by his actions.

Tombstone Tom had been playing a game of his own for some little time, and a game that no one suspected. Simon Stone was the man on whom his eyes appeared to rest; but Wilse Wharton was the person he was watching.

The coming of Mountain Jim was as much a surprise to him as to any one else, but he lost no time in trying to take advantage of it. The instant the revolver of Storm no longer covered him the Tombstone man hurled himself, with a tiger-like spring, upon Wharton, toward whom, for some time, he had been trying to edge.

His action saved Mountain Jim's life, since Wharton's pistol was already leveled. The barrel swerved a little just as the trigger was pulled, and the ball tore through shoulder instead of skull, making a jagged, painful wound.

Then from the other side Poncho Pete, a shade late, sprung upon him, knocking the revolver from his grasp and closing in. The attack from either side was quick and desperate, and should have been a success.

Wilse Wharton had a chance once more to show the qualities for which Iron-Arm, the outlaw, had been noted. There were two against one; but what of it? Probably Tombstone Tom was not altogether certain of himself, since he shouted as he closed:

"It's Iron-Arm, the road-agent. Snatch him, boys; snatch him!"

As the words left his mouth, Wharton struck once, a half-arm blow, that did not break the hold of his assailants. Then his hands shot out, seizing either man by the throat, and with a sudden jerk, he dashed their heads together with a crash that could be heard for yards.

Dazed and blinded, they staggered and almost fell.

Then came two crushing hits that stretched them senseless.

As they dropped away Iron-Arm sprung over the body of Poncho Pete and struck squarely at Mountain Jim.

It was a tremendous blow, that would have felled an ox, and the man went down, while another revolver leaped into sight.

Then Wharton hesitated. The men of Snorter's Gulch were probably backing his game; but which men were they? In the darkness they all looked very much alike. With a sudden inspiration, he turned and fled.

His foes, doubtless, would follow him.

He was not wrong. A dozen men sprung after him, and then his weapon began to talk. "Crack! crack! crack!" it said, and three men went down, though he had only paused as it seemed for an instant.

"Ha, ha," he shouted back. "The game is up, and Simon Storm won't fight, neither will I. Good-morning!"

He had a horse not far away and was sure of his line of retreat. It seemed certain that he would get away. In such a light, and with the start he had it would take a good man to hit the side of a house.

A man better than good was there. He stepped out sideways from the crush and flinging up his hand pulled trigger.

"Now you've got him gather him up before you lose him again. He's not more than half dead, and he's a mighty slippery fellow."

It was the careless voice of Magic Mike that spoke, and he had made one of his marvelous shots, for he had brought down Iron-Arm without doing him any serious damage. As he saw several rush forward to take his advice he added:

"I tell you, gents, we're just in from the mountains, and we've got a mighty queer yarn to spin."

"Spin it you shall, and before Judge Lynch, too. St. George, will you take the bench now? Back, you Snorters! It's not your night on."

It was Chess Barker who spoke, and as he stepped forward he was greeted with a cheer. To the most of those present he seemed like one risen from the dead, for this was his first appearance since the night when the attempt to assassinate him was made.

There was no more delay or hesitation. The fight had come on at the wrong time. The leading spirits were overwhelmed by the unexpected; and the men from the Gulch, who would have stood by their leader under other circumstances, were cowed and uncertain. The crowd in one mass surged away to the front of Goodman's, taking with them the four prisoners—the two outlaws originally captured by Tombstone Tom; the man, Simon Storm, whose coming had been so much of a sensation; and last of all the person who was at least accused of being the leader of the bandits who lurked in the labyrinth of canyons to the north of Walnut Bar.

Senator Storm was still coolly defiant. He watched the construction of the irregular court with a sneer on his face, and spoke at the first available opportunity.

"You may go on with your farce if you want to, but there will come, one day, a terrible reckoning. I am Simon Storm, late member of the California Legislature. I came here expressly to buy into what seemed a valuable find. On the way, I was robbed, not only of money, but of what I valued far higher, my daughter and my friend. To imagine that I have anything to do with the ruffians who were trying to break into my sister's room, is ridiculous. As to Martin Lee, I believe him to be a worthy man. If he is not, it is nothing to hang me for. If the letters he carries can be believed, he is a good superintendent, and I would have liked nothing better than to get him into the Snorter. But if he has any bad deeds to answer for, I defy any man living to show that I have anything to do with them. Go on now, if you choose, I have nothing more to say."

"You may be Senator Storm," said the judge, coldly. "I am confident that you are the man elected under that name—but I understand you to say that you are the brother of yonder lady. That I know to be impossible, since, as I have stated once before this evening, I occupy that position myself. My real, right name, gentlemen, that I dropped some dozen years ago, according to custom, when I came to California, was Simon Storm. I have lately heard the story of Miss Lavinia's life, through an agent, employed by her, and I can very easily convince her that I am her long-lost brother. That's what I have to say. Next."

"And I," said Chess Barker, coming forward, "have something more to add. I recognized this man when he first came here. I would never have betrayed him, since he once saved my life down on the Feather river washings; but he, in a cowardly way, attempted to kill me for fear that I would. Gentlemen, he's a disguised fraud, with false hair, painted face, and the blackest record in the Southwest. When I knew him on the Plumas, he was Tom Hand, road-agent, robber, and desperado. Wash him up, and you'll find he's not a day over thirty."

Harvey Wilde came forward, under cover of the roar that arose.

"Gentlemen, I will tell you my little story, and when you want fuller particulars, I'll swear to them."

The crowd taken aback by Chess Barker's statement, were now looking in wonder at the man that had been fooled, not only them, but a large section of the world that should have had a better chance to know him. Nevertheless, they were willing to listen to Wilde.

"I met this man and his supposed daughter, and started with them for Walnut Bar. She was a beautiful girl, but she was not his daughter, but his confederate. Their scheme was to capture me, and taking the girl along first wring a large ransom from me, and then induce me to marry her, either by dazzling me with her charms or making me believe that I had compromised her. I have the whole truth from one who was in the plot. What other schemes he had let others tell."

"I can tell something more of him," chimed in the sharp voice of Miss Lavinia. "I believe he assumed the name of Storm to get me in his power. I have thrown more money away on him than he ever earned honestly, and had made them—brother and niece as I thought—my heirs. They wanted to kill me then, but when I hinted to him that I had not done as I had said, but that my old will was my only one, he arranged with this other villain to carry me away and wring out of me what signatures they needed before completing the work. They would have taken me with poor Aurora I suppose, if they had not intended first—as they did—to wheedle out of me what uninvested cash I had. A precious rascal he was—and I thought he was my brother. As for this other man I know nothing about him. If his name is Storm let him prove it. I trust no one again until I know."

"Don't be alarmed," answered St. George, lightly. "I'll look after your interests as far as is needed, but I've no desire to wring in. Faith, if you want a brother the proof will have to come from the other side. I've been alone in the world too long to have much natural feeling left. If you'll give your money to an orphan asylum you can come and look after me for your board and clothes till one of us goes up the flume."

Mountain Jim had recovered his senses and was watching the course of events in an unsatisfied way. At this stage he found a chance to put a word in.

"See hyar, I don't want ter spile yer inner- cent amusement, but this looks ter be gittin' rough on me an' my pards. We sorter knowed this kentry ov old an' got er few p'ints from Lame Luke. Then we kin hyar an' reesked our lives, fustly, ter find out ef Simon Storm wa'n't ther man we wanted; secondly, ter rake in this hyar Wharton; thirdly, ter git er few p'ints on ther Melchor case. We've done our work clean up to ther handle, an' now yer want ter take

ther bread outen our mouths. It can't be did, gentlemen. They's our prisoners, an' we'll hold 'em es sich er bu'st a wheel."

"No necessity for threats," retorted General St. George. "If you can show your authority to take these prisoners into the jurisdiction of a regularly constituted court, the people of Walnut Bar will take great pleasure in turning them over to you."

"We kin do that very thing—an' kin guarantee a hangin'-bee shortly after we git back," said Tombstone Tom, stepping briskly forward.

"I reckon we've wound ther gang up, one way er another, an' we're lookin' fur a vote ov thanks an' er leather medal."

"You be!" snorted Poncho Pete. "Wot ther thunder you got ter do with it? Me an' Mountain Jim did ther work, an' our pard over ther mount'ins pulled ther wires. Dry up, er we'll hev ter pull yer in, too."

"You think?" retorted Tombstone Tom, with a careless change in his voice.

"I think I've held up my corner of the box as well as the best, and we won't quarrel about the divy. How is it now?"

As he spoke he brushed his hand over his face, cast away wig and beard, and threw back his ragged coat.

"Dave Keene!" exclaimed at least three voices, and one of them was Wharton's.

"Yes, Keene the detective. I've trailed you down at last, and it wasn't half the work I thought it would be. I've wasted enough time and work for three such cases, and fooled even Jim and Fete. How is it, gentlemen? Have we got a case, and can we take them along back?"

A roar of assent was the answer. Walnut Bar was satisfied of the guilt of the prisoners and would leave punishment to the law.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE CURTAIN IS RUNG DOWN.

In all Walnut Bar the most astonished man was Alligator Abe, who came forward to stare at Keene.

"Lightnin' blast it, he's Satan on wheels! I swor'd to 'em at the Gulchez it were ther 'riginal Tom—an' I'll be dog-goned ef I don't b'lieve he's stole his clothes. I'd say it war Tom yit; but ef he are good with his irons an' limber with his tongue he can't set up no sich game ez this. I will be hanged!"

Both Storm and Wharton knew Keene as a cool, successful sleuth, rude and uncouth at times, but noted and notorious. When his gripe once tightened on a victim, it never let go. They were not surprised—being prepared for almost anything—but they were disheartened. It was plain that Walnut Bar would make no effort to assert its rights, but would turn the prisoners over together. A few wanted to have a hanging-match, but cooler counsels prevailed. A guard was obtained from the more reliable citizens, and Poncho Pete and his pard, Mountain Jim, divided the watches, leaving Keene to look after outside work.

An hour or so later the detective sought the girl bear-tamer, and found her by the bedside of Lame Luke. Magic Mike was with her, and the two were watching the sleeping invalid with much concern. He had been a friend to Alta when she needed one, and it was a shock to her to hear, when she came in from the mountains, that he had been lying so near to death.

"I wanted to see you two," said Keene, drawing her aside. "You seem to have made up your differences and I'm glad of it. I'll have the proof down fine that Wharton wronged you and yours beyond pardon. But I've got proof, or pretty near it, that may not be quite so pleasant. John Melchor's fortune will never go your way. His true heiress was the woman that I understand lies dead in the mountains."

"I know it," answered Alta. "At least, I knew that I was not his daughter, and was not entitled to his fortune. The girl you speak of and myself were brought up together, at one time, but I can remember further back than she could. Mrs. Dane was my mother, and she was nothing to John Melchor, except that she took his money for services that she rendered when she brought his child up as her own, and did the same thing as turn me adrift."

"And afterward?"

"Afterward, when I was Lame Luke's pupil I met Magic Mike—as he was called. Wilson Wharton had not gone altogether to the bad, and knew us both, pretending to be our friend. I did not know that he knew Aurora, or that he was using Marshall. I went to tell my mother, whom I had not seen for months, that I would be married soon, and I saw Marshall parting the door from Aurora. To-night, then, I heard him say, and shrunk away. It was as I thought, my plighted husband parting as a lover from the girl I hated."

"I went away and waited. He did not come to me, and the next day I heard what was on many mouths. My mother, Mrs. Dane, had been killed the night before by a burglar. Ten thousand dollars was missing; and so was her daughter, for Aurora was supposed to be her daughter, and not I."

"I saw Wilson Wharton more than once in the next few weeks, and never suspected him. I did suspect Michael Marshall, and I did not

find him. I was mad enough to believe the worst. If I could have found him I would have slain him, for I thought he had robbed and murdered my mother and deserted me for Aurora. Yet Wharton was the real criminal.

"I searched for Marshall, but found no traces until I heard that he was dead. Afterward I heard that he had come to life again. I intended to kill him, and began my search again only to find how vilely I had misunderstood him.

"When John Melchor's second wife died, he looked for his daughter but did not find her. You and Marshall heard enough to make you believe that I was his heiress. I am not, and it is no disappointment. We can live for each other, and can leave Wharton to the law's revenge. He thought he had slain his friend and blackened his memory; twice was he very near to it, but in the end it all comes right. He was foiled by his own game, since I doubt not he sent me the intelligence that led me here.

"I have told you the whole truth because I once told you differently. I do not suppose that you longer suspect—if you have conferred with your men, Poncho Pete and Mountain Jim, you cannot, since Bad Ben, whom they captured after they had fought their way out from the gulch in which they had been entrapped, revealed the secrets of Wharton's life, as he had gathered them."

"That is all right," said Keene, quietly. "I heard Wharton's confession to a good many things, and have him down fine. But I owe Luke a great deal for having put us on the trail and given us the points on the retreat. I won't ask how he knew them so well in years that are past; it was too lucky for us that he did. I doubt if he would have told them, though, if he had not believed that Iron-Arm was Mike Marshall, and that if your passion for revenge drew you into those canyons, from which he could not hold you, it would be to your death. What can I do for him?"

"Nothing," said Marshall, coming forward. "Alta and I will look after him, though he will not need our care long. He is growing stronger and better. In a few weeks he will be well. Then we will go back to where life is tamer but safer, and quit this roving existence forever. I've got a starter from Storm, and can take care of the future."

Keene was too shrewd to lose the prisoners that he had taken with so much trouble. It was Simon Storm that he had set out to trail down—the breaking up of the outlaws of the gulches being rather an incidental matter. When once he had established the identity of the disguised senator there were a dozen charges waiting for him. He and Wharton were not likely to miss their deserts.

Miss Lavinia scarcely mourned over the fate of her false brother—though to this day she cannot altogether forget the girl adventuress she once thought was her niece.

Harvey Wilde found his way back as quickly as possible to more civilized regions. He made no investments about Walnut Bar—and it is probable that he will be very careful for the rest of his life how he picks up promiscuous acquaintances.

Snorter's Gulch eventually came into the possession of Chess Barker, his rough but reliable friend, Dan the Drover, and General St. George. The latter has closed his "Office," and with his sister as the managing spirit of his house makes quite a respectable citizen.

Alligator Abe, who had no particular connection with this story except as an instrument for bringing Tombstone Tom and Chess Barker together, drifted away; and Bad Ben, who had secured a new lease of life by the evidence he gave against his former associates, died "with his boots on" a few months later.

Old Eph was never positively heard of from the time he broke away from Aurora; but the two cubs dropped into the possession of Poison Pete, and remained at the Best Chance for a long time. Their mistress had no further use for them. Lame Luke had ceased his wandering, and Mike Marshall, transformed into a steady-going banker, was no longer a Man of Frills.

THE END.

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